Remember (that you are) to die

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Remember (that you are) to die

by 13empress

Summary

“How long have I been here?” Will asked, but immediately waved off her answer, realizing it didn’t matter either way. “Look, my name is Will Graham – I don’t know what happened but you have to give my partner a call.”

“I’ll get the doctor,” she told him, her voice trained to the mellow murmur just about all medical professionals used on omegas.

Will opened his mouth to tell her that there was no need, that he felt fine, and if she would just listen, he could discharge himself and be out of her hair in thirty minutes flat. He grabbed the safety rails and forced himself to stand, though the motion made him a little dizzy. Something on his peripheral vision grabbed at him. The whiteboard strip above the hospital bed – W GRAHAM-LECTER, omega, male, B positive – struck him like a physical blow.

EDIT 6 Oct 2024
Back on indeterminate hiatus due to health issues despite my temporary spell of wellness, sorry folks

Notes

I have never had amnesia, and so, I probably got it wrong. Sorry. And sorry again for all the horrible puns that Hannibal makes about amnesia - it's a serious condition and making fun of it makes you a prick - but he's not a good guy, okay, he's Hannibal. I'm doing this to vent out all my frustrations over my health complications - not amnesia thank goodness - and have some fun.

Tempus Fugit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some distant alarm wail trickled through Will Graham's muddled consciousness. He observed the noise with detachment, as though it were some far off whale cry before his mind grasped onto the sound and pulled itself up into consciousness. Disorientated, he took a shaky breath as his body became solid through a series of aches and twinges. He knew immediately that he was in a hospital but couldn't remember why. It couldn't have been serious though; shifting onto his side, Will felt more stiff and thirsty than injured, and he wasn't attached to anything.

Rubbing a hand over his clammy face, Will sat up and looked around, not recognizing the room as the usual omega ward down at the local hospital. The decision of whether to bother calling someone over was decided for him when the light by the door came on, revealing a nurse, her fresh crisp lemony scent revealing her to be omega and single.

"Are you okay?" She asked softly, the uncertainty on her face making him want to reassure her.

Will nodded. "What time is it?"

"Just past five in the morning." She switched on the reading light.

"How long have I been here?" Will asked, but immediately waved off her answer, realizing it didn't matter either way. "Look, my name is Will Graham – I don't know what happened but you have to give my partner a call."

Did he also have to call Miss Delia? No, it was bad enough that she worried about him every day he went off to work, he didn't want to worry her with news of a hospital visit when he was obviously fine. He wondered again why he couldn't remember being admitted, but it'll probably come back to him.

"I'll call your mate," she offered.

"I don't have one," he told her, irritated at her presumption. Throwing off the blankets, Will swung his legs off the bed to sit with his back to her, not willing to subject himself to her feelings on the matter. There was a pair of house slippers, too nice for hospital issue, waiting for him. He blinked at them, momentarily thrown by their appearance. "I'm an officer at the NOPD, my partner is Vic Haschen. She's in my emergency contact info – you need to call her."

Usually when asked the nurses would always call Haschen, though a few obstinate ones would offer to call his father once they heard he was single. Will mentally snorted at the idea of that. It wasn't that the old man didn't come for him – he always did come, but the less Will saw of him the better.

“I’ll get the doctor,” she told him, her voice trained to the mellow murmur just about all medical professionals used on omegas.

Will opened his mouth to tell her that there was no need, that he felt *fine*, and if she would *just listen*, he could discharge himself and be out of her hair in thirty minutes flat. He grabbed the safety rails and forced himself to stand, though the motion made him a little dizzy. Something on his peripheral vision grabbed at him. The whiteboard strip above the hospital bed – *W GRAHAM-LECTER, omega, male, B positive* – struck him like a physical blow.

“Good morning, Will, I’m Doctor Maslow. How are you this morning?”

Will felt the edges of his vision waver as he turned from the unfamiliar alteration to his name and faced the doctor.

“Do you know what day it is?” The beta was middle-aged, of East European ancestry, rapidly balding, and spoke like he was gentling an unpredictable stray. Any other day, this would piss Will off but this time, he knew it was probably warranted.

“Um, it’s Tuesday or Wednesday, I assume – unless I’ve been out longer.”

Monday was yesterday, he had spilled coffee on his pants and had to change to the pair that was slightly tighter around the hips than he liked – Haschen liked to tease him about the looks his backside got in them, and he kept meaning to get a new pair but never could be bothered when he finally managed a day off.

“And the date?”

“August, fifth – no, sixth or seventh.”

The doctor nodded, smiling pleasantly but Will knew that everything was *wrong, wrong, wrong*. His mind leaped ahead of all the evidence and gave him an answer which didn’t make sense – he didn’t feel like he had just woken from a long-term coma. Will remembered listening to the radio on his lunch break about some shooting in Israel and the share market being down again. His name was Will Graham – or at least it should be.

“Where am I?”

“Baltimore,” the doctor replied, succinct and losing some of his initial apprehension.

Will nodded and answered the follow up questions thrown at him, like it was normal to wake up with a different name in a different city. The doctor seemed relieved that he wasn’t upset, and left promising that his doctor would check in on him in an hour or two. The nurse returned with a tray bearing juice, water and a tuna sandwich.

“Breakfast isn’t until seven,” she smiled, “So just in case you’re hungry.”

He mumbled thanks and shuffled to the small breakfast table by the windows. The nurse pulled open the curtains. There were bare trees outside, wet from overnight rain, and nondescript business buildings across the wide road. Will stared at the overcast skyline, unable to recognize any of it.

“I’m going to call your mate,” she told him, laying a robe over his shoulders as though she were afraid to touch him. She was inexperienced, and she worried over him more than she should; she was going to get burn out if this kept up; she wasn’t really suitable for being a nurse. Will wasn’t going to tell her any of that. “He’s going to want to know you’re up.”

His stomach twisted.

“No,” Will avoided her gaze and stared at the water bottle label, mouth dry in way that water couldn’t fix. “I’d like to make a phone call.”

“*Please*,” he added politely, when he sensed her hesitate.

“It’s still very early.”

“Please,” he repeated, voice firmly insistent even as he curled a little in on himself like he was overwhelmed; Will could play vulnerable confused omega if that’s what it took to get him a phone. He needed to talk to someone that he knew. He needed to know *what the hell was going on*.

The girl smiled, poorly hidden pity in her blue eyes, and went to fetch the phone.

Disregarding the early hour, Will made the call to his father, hoping that the man wouldn’t pick up as much as he hoped the opposite. The number was disconnected. They had just had another bland five minute conversation over the weekend, and Will had hung up gratefully at the conclusion, empty. Now, he didn’t even know where the man was. How much time had passed? Weeks? Months? More?

There was a fancy bouquet of flowers in a simple glass vase sitting on the built-in sideboard, it’s presence mysterious and frightening; it wasn’t the type of thing bought for a colleague or a friend.

Will drank the water on auto-pilot, then sipped a mug of strong sweet tea brought by the young nurse, Jessica, who informed him that she was on night-duty for his room. He learned from her that he was at the dedicated omega-only branch of the Mercy, Baltimore, and though he would see Doctor Hayes regularly, his treating physicians were Doctor Vaughn, who was consulting from John Hopkins, and Doctor Bloom, who apparently worked with the FBI. It was an odd combination. Will didn’t ask her the diagnosis, or what made him lucky enough to get the special treatment.

When it finally hit a more sane hour, he tried Sergeant Harris, unofficial mentor to every omega officer in the district. The call was answered this time, but it’s very clear from a few simple exchanges that the woman on the phone spoke very poor English and didn’t know Harris at all. Starting to seriously reconsider the coma theory, Will switched on the mounted television and stared blankly at the images referencing several shooting incidents in Canada a

year ago and that today, the small memorial erected in remembrance of the lives lost would be unveiled.

He dialed the next number, not really expecting an answer and so almost dropped the phone when it connected on the third ring.

“Hello, Laurie House,” a deep female voice answered, sonorous even on the tiny speakers of the cordless.

“Miss Delia?”

“No, I’m sorry honey, this is Angela. My aunt passed two years ago.” There was a pause, and the sound of the kettle whistling. It died off, presumably because she had just taken it off the stove. “May I ask who’s calling?”

Will took a deep breath and felt the plastic of the phone creak under his grip. His last memories were of Monday, and he had missed breakfast – by the smell wafting up the halls, it had been leftover rice re-cooked with bell peppers and onions. He could still smell it.

“Hello?”

He relaxed his grip on the phone. “It’s Will Graham.”

“Will Graham,” her voice grew warm, “I remember you, such pretty hair.”

Will chuckled under his breath and ran a shaky hand through his hair, the mess of curls a lot shorter than when he last ran his hand through the locks, self-conscious about them.

“How’s your doctor?” She asked, “It’s been, goodness, well over ten years since I last saw you.”

“Oh,” he swallowed thickly against his growing anxiety, “yes, fine.”

It must have been the wrong thing to say because she asked, “Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” he repeated, forcing himself to smile into the receiver.

Miss Delia was dead, he was in Baltimore with no idea how the hell he got here, he had gone from never getting past the first date to mated, and the last thing he remembered was heading home with coffee-soiled pants and throwing them in the wash, eating the dried-out plate of fried potatoes and curried rice left in the oven for him then putting the wet laundry in the dryer. He’d fallen into bed right after, and presumably gotten up the next day, Tuesday, to go to work.

“Will, I may not know you as well as my aunt did,” her voice was dry and steady but Will knew she was concerned, and he was sorry that he had made her concerned. “We look after our own here at Laurie. You have called me at 7AM on a Thursday out of the blue, and...”

“What’s the date today?”

“Pardon?”

“The date,” Will cleared his throat, feeling stupid. “The year, what year is it?”

There was a pause, but then she answered, voice as deep and calm and steady as if she were reciting it to a metronome.

“It’s October twenty-second, 2015.”

Will sucked in a breath, and swallowed down the rush of adrenalin that made him want to tear at his hair in frustration and throw the phone against the wall.

“What day do you think it is?”

He closed his eyes, suddenly exhausted. “I have to go, sorry,” he said, and hung up just as she started to tell him that he should feel free to call her anytime.

Will stared blindly out the window until the morning shift began and Maya came to introduce herself, dark-skinned, armed with a wide toothy smile and confident. She’s in her forties and had children, at least two; she smelled rich and ripe, like the skin of an apple just lightly fermented, the fragrance of an omega who had nurtured life. Unlike his night nurse, Maya called him by name and greeted him like they were old friends, offering to get him the good coffee from the staff room and a fresh towel so he could take his morning shower. He liked her, sick of Jessica’s nervous hovering, but he got the sense that her friendliness was pity disguised as cheer.

When Doctor Hayes dropped by and explained that he was experiencing a mix of anterograde and retrograde amnesia due to a serious car accident and previous neurological damage, Will felt darkly bemused for he had probably had this conversation with the doctor before. It was like groundhog day, in reverse – time kept moving and everyone knew it but you.

She handed him his wallet, some fancy leather thing, and looked at him expectantly. Will flipped it open and stared the ID for the FBI Academy. The shock lasted only for a second because yes, he could see it – working for the FBI, retiring from field service to teach. He recognized his design in this evidence of life lived, but the portrait of him, he kept coming back to it. No one would guess he was close to forty from his face, and his hair, clipped short enough to be more functional than decorative but long enough to be combed back; it’s not a hairstyle he would pick – he’d prefer a fringe to hide behind – and so he can only guess that this alpha, listed as *H. Lecter* on his ID under emergency contact, preferred it.

“Do you think you’ll be up to having a visitor today?” She paused, careful. “Your mate, he wants to come see you but he doesn’t want to upset you.”

Like last time, she didn’t say.

Will cocked an eyebrow and wondered what happened last time.

It would be *interesting*, to say the least, meeting the alpha he'd chosen.

Yesterday, Will had been a single male omega of twenty-four years, living at Laurie House, fondly referred to as the 'Virginity Vault' by Haschen – though plenty of the renters were widowed or divorcees, but no one liked to talk about *those omegas* – and perpetually single with first dates lined up until December, finding every prospect to be lacking and weathering daily pep talks with Miss Delia to keep looking for *surely* there was someone perfect for him. Must have worked, Will thought, for here he was – thirty-eight years old, presumably paired off with someone who didn't make him want to commit spousal murder.

Doctor Hayes nodded at his silent agreement and went to make the call.

Will examined the wallet further and found a driver's license, the little picture of him somewhere between his mental image of himself and the cool professionalism of the Academy ID, pink-cheeked with health, and groomed in a way that only the well-heeled seemed to be able to achieve. There was also a loyalty card to an organic supermarket, a half-faded receipt for a meal at some Japanese restaurant that cost a hair-raising sum of money, and three credit cards, a bank card, and a well-scuffed library card. They made less sense to him and he left them in the wallet, unsettled. There were no photographs tucked in anywhere, and he'd think that strange except as Maya had demonstrated to him earlier, cell phones seemed to have improved vastly from what he was used to, and he probably kept his own gallery on an equally perplexing device.

Will took a shower, and purposely forced himself to not linger over the unusual scar on his left shoulder, the healed bullet wound in his right forearm, and a neat surgical scar on his stomach, down and to the side of his belly button. The last one made him physically ill, and he ignored it, unwilling to let his mind wander down the paths that twisted out from there.

He had just settled back at the window with a fresh cup of coffee when an alpha strolled in escorted by Doctor Hayes. Will froze, his eyes fixating on the man's pristine leather shoes; his omega senses purred *alpha* but his mind whispered *danger*.

"Will," Doctor Hayes began.

"That's alright, Susanna," the alpha said, and to Will's surprise, she just left the room.

Tall with an imposing heft to his shoulders, the alpha had light brown-blonde hair sprinkled with grey, elegant bearing, and expensive taste in clothes. Will avoided his face, intimidated by *how old his mate was* – though considering that he was supposed to be thirty-eight years old himself, hardly surprising. Something inside of him rose in recognition at the scent of something spiced and almost smoky that curled through the back of his throat, muted by the hospital's air-conditioning system which cleared out pheromones as fast as they were released.

"Hi," he cleared his throat, suddenly uncertain in the face of this...evidence.

"Hello, Will."

For a moment, the man just stared at him, eyes soft but face expressionless. Whatever he was feeling and thinking, the alpha locked it all behind a calm mask of business-like interest as he joined Will at the table.

Will appreciated the restraint – he wasn't sure if he could deal with a distraught stranger claiming to be his alpha right now.

"How much do you remember?"

If he wanted to, he could probably figure out everything. Like cue cards laid face down on a table, the evidence was all there (*private hospital room, fancy bouquet, clean surgical abdominal scar, little comforts like the slippers and the robe, mysterious European accent, expensive shoes, clever hands*) waiting to be flipped over and read. Will fiddled with the card edges but was too anxious to peek, still trying to digest the idea that come tomorrow, he might forget all of this – what year it was, Miss Delia's passing, the accident, the hospital, Jessica, Maya, Doctor Hayes, H. Lecter.

"Bush is the president," he said.

The man's lips quirked, there and gone again. "We'll have to work on your general knowledge but there's hope for you yet."

Will cracked a smile, darkly amused that they were joking about his brain being screwed up, and stared at the man's tie. The alpha wore a tailored three-piece suit in solemn charcoal and had a long coat folded neatly over one arm, everything about him so neat and orderly that the slightly crooked tie leaped out at him. Will felt annoyed on the man's behalf, because he already knew that H. Lecter would absolutely hate his tie being crooked like that, and then abashed because the man had clearly dropped everything and rushed over as soon as he had been called.

"Hannibal Lecter," the alpha held out a hand across the table, like there was nothing out of the ordinary about this.

Oh. It was worse than he had thought – he'd figured the H. in H. Lecter had to stand for something old-fashioned like Heston or Horatio, but *Hannibal*?

Will pried his hands from the edge of the table and reached out, quelling the urge to wipe his palm against his shirt first. The alpha didn't shake his hand, just slowly brought the captured appendage to his mouth, an audible breath against skin so sensual that it bordered on indecent.

Will's breath caught in his throat. To his embarrassment, he literally choked but Hannibal Lecter didn't notice, eyes closed as he reverently scented the wrist and palm. Will got a flash of the man behind him, mouth and nose pressed to his shoulder, scenting, *drinking him in*, and froze in some strange terrifying no-man's land between desire and violation. He wondered how many times the alpha had been allowed close enough to introduce himself, and how many times he had left disappointed.

"Forgive me," the alpha said, eyes averted carefully as he released Will's hand a moment later, "Every time you are lucid, I hope that you..."

I hope that you have returned to me.

For a second, Will looked. The flicker of self-deprecating bemusement on thin lips. The softening of eyes with pupils so enlarged that one could only see darkness. Hannibal Lecter was not classically handsome, but Will could see the attraction; he wasn't boring, that's for sure.

The impressions scattered over him in an explosion of confetti – intense perfectionist; obsessively controlled; physically powerful; mentally resilient; emotionally distant yet utterly vulnerable; a man of contradictions; a savage with the heart of a renaissance man; a sensualist with the self-control of a stoic; a scholar hiding a predator. Hannibal Lecter was armored extensively, yet his back, all it's *vulnerable* expanses – that spinal cord wrapped around the central nervous system where all the alpha instincts that made him who he was at his most base – it was turned towards his beloved, his *one great weakness*, his...

Will reached for the half-drunk bottle of orange juice and drank more for the distraction than thirst.

"Have you had breakfast?" Lecter stood and set down a canvas food bag Will hadn't even noticed.

Will shook his head, not trusting his own voice. The idea of eating that tuna sandwich had seemed like bland torture, and hospital catering hadn't come by yet with breakfast. He wondered what a fancy place like this served patients. There had been a menu which doubled as an order form, but Will hadn't bothered filling it in.

The alpha smiled, pleased, and proceeded to unpack his bag. Will stared down at the plate holding some kind of rice fritter and an omelet made with sausage and peppers. It was comfort food, specifically the type of fare he indulged in every Thursday on his day off when he had the time for a sit-down breakfast. Hannibal Lecter poured them both coffee from a thermos, and retook his seat after hanging up his coat and taking off his jacket, movements displaying an efficiency and familiarity with the room. Will stared at silver cutlery laid down before him on thick paper napkins, frustrated. Never mind the thirteen lost years – how many times had he woken up in this room, been told that he had been in a car accident and was a teacher at the FBI Academy, only to wake up the next day having forgotten it all? His eyes burned, forcing him to blink.

"My favorite," he murmured.

"I haven't forgotten," the alpha told him, like it was normal for him to be bringing along Will's usual Thursday brunch order.

"You made this?"

Hannibal Lecter smiled smugly, all preening alpha pleasure, and started to eat. Will joined him a moment later, losing his hesitation in the face of continued nonchalance.

Everything was delicious – the sausages were savory, succulent and spiced perfectly to tickle the tongue and spare the tears, the eggs fluffy, and the fritters were crisp enough to crack like an egg – and clearly made with affection (*must live close by*, his mind whispered, *the food was still warm*). Will immediately fell in love with the coffee, dark and rich with a fragrant aftertaste, the complete opposite of the watery instant sludge he usually drank which left behind a sour layer of grit on his tongue.

"It's good."

Lecter's eyes lingered and then finally dropped away. "Usually by now, you're interrogating me."

Will didn't mean to sound bitter, but it just came out. "*Sorry* to disappoint."

"Hardly," the man smiled down at his plate, "It's part of your charm – I could never entirely predict you."

Will eyed the man's free hand, resting casually against his coffee cup, momentarily thrown by the clear affection in that answer. Regardless of how he had felt about this alpha before the accident, Hannibal Lecter believed himself to be happily mated to Will. The alpha had obviously come to terms with the situation, and seemed undeterred by Will's *disability*. It was refreshing, after a morning of being managed like a child.

He broke a rice fritter in half, examining the moist inside – baked, he noted, not fried. "When was the accident?"

"Six months ago. You went for a drive to clear your head."

Well, he was regretting that now. The fork froze midway to his mouth – *did you just make an inappropriate pun?*

Judging by the tiny glint of amusement in the alpha's downcast eyes, he was very sorry but *yes*.

Will hid the wildly inappropriate laughter with an appreciative hum, enjoying the fritter. Trust him to chose an oddball alpha with a sense of humor as darkly absurd as his own. Replaying the moment in his head, Will cleared his throat, clamping down on the chuckle that wanted to shake its way out because seriously, *it wasn't funny at all*. By the glances he was being shot, the alpha was proud of his little joke and delighted that Will had seen through him.

"How did we meet?"

"The old-fashioned way; I was called upon to be a witness for a traditional courtship, and the suitor's prospective mate lived in your city; I went for a walk around my hotel; you were on duty that night."

Will tried to imagine it – their eyes meeting across the street, striking up a conversation, giving tips on where the best coffee was, tentative flirting, accepting an invitation to meet again. It was so out of character for him that he had a hard time filling in the blanks.

“You were chasing a mugger, and tackled him headfirst into traffic. You called on the crowd for a doctor, I volunteered my services and later saw both of you to the hospital. Fortunately, you were both cleared with concussions and minor injuries, and your suspect was arrested. A satisfying end to a memorable evening.”

That sounded…entirely plausible. New information slotted into the body of evidence; his mate had medical experience. Will plucked ‘surgeon’ out of the scattered confetti ribbons drifting slowly around him and pinned it to the board.

“I promised to give my statement the next evening, and you met me at my hotel.”

Will finished the last of his breakfast, thoughtful. Yes, he probably showed up at the alpha’s hotel and sat down with him in the downstairs bar to maintain propriety. He would have left it as the last thing to do before clocking off; the alpha would have offered him dinner, and Will would have tried to decline citing it would be unprofessional.

“You were very resistant to my desire for your company.” Brown eyes crinkled at the edges in mischief, “I don’t think you liked me very much. I was discouraged, until I discovered your main objection to me was my profession.”

“You’re a *surgeon*,” Will pointed out, confused.

“Actually, I had switched to psychiatry and psychotherapy when we met. It’s the reason why the client insisted on my presence at the courtship.”

Will literally suppressed a shudder, and threw back the last of his coffee to avoid saying something he couldn’t take back. By the growing smile on the alpha’s face, he wasn’t hiding his distaste as well as he thought.

“I don’t like being psychoanalyzed.”

“Yes, I know,” the alpha’s voice remained light, teasing, “And I guarantee you, no psychoanalysis occurred. Since you would not give me the pleasure of having you for dinner, I asked you to have a drink with me while I answered your questions. You agreed – and then proceeded to order the most expensive whiskey at the bar.”

Will snorted, because yes, that sounded like him. He could only imagine how much he would have enjoyed taking someone like Hannibal Lecter – almost the textbook definition of a modern alpha with his careful grooming, his suits, his overbearing confidence, that superficial charm – down a peg or two.

“I flirted shamelessly – you were unmoved. Finally, I asked you why you weren’t mated, and you told me that you wouldn’t be including that in my statement.”

Will felt an unwanted blush crawl up his neck and jaw as Hannibal Lecter – so perfectly genteel that one felt an automatic urge to sit up straighter – gave him an adoring look. Uncomfortable, he reached for his coffee only to stop short, as the cup was empty.

“You could not have stopped me from courting you after that.”

“I’m sure I tried,” he muttered under his breath.

Hannibal Lecter averted his gaze, using the silence as effectively as if he had made some florid confession.

Dammit, Will exhaled. It was the ultimate irony of the universe that him, passive-aggressive and jaded, would end up in his own *soap opera* complete with *amnesia* and a *pining* mate.

“We were mated the following spring, I asked you to marry me, and you moved to Baltimore shortly after.”

No long drawn-out courtship?

No, Will thought, and flipped over the cue cards bothering him, *why would you want a drawn-out courtship?* Hannibal Lecter was almost obnoxiously wealthy, educated, a witty conversationalist, and presumably actually enjoyed the challenge of getting past Will’s prickly exterior – they clearly shared a similarly bleak sense of humor. No, Will imagined it was a whirlwind romance; after he got his head out of his ass, he would have been smart enough to realize that Lecter was better than he could hope for, and let himself be wooed.

Having an alpha like that opened doors, Will wasn’t stupid. Plus he did want children. While he knew that money did not buy happiness, like all omegas born of beta parents or impoverished homes, an alpha’s ability to provide would be paramount to him, his omega need for security inflamed to an almost pathological state by his inadequate upbringing.

Apparently finished with his narration, the alpha checked his watch.

“Somewhere to be?”

“Yes,” the man admitted with a refreshing lack of guilt, “I set my own hours which allows me a great deal of flexibility, but there are daily obligations which cannot be ignored.”

Will nodded to the door, “Don’t let me keep you.”

Without attempting to bore Will with sentimental drivel, the alpha cleared the table. “I will return at seven.”

Will stayed in his seat as the man graced him with another lingering smile, put on his jacket and left without fanfare, coat draped over one arm.

Chapter End Notes

I could use a beta reader or general second opinion. I'm Australian - so you know, pointers on being American are always useful.
And I feel weird, cos I've only ever written AOS Trek fics for the last few years.
Also I am doing this for therapy (I genuinely have homework from my therapist to have

fun cos apparently my illness is a big gaping maw sucking all the life out of me) so be cool if there's something that bothers you - obviously let me know, but this story is seriously already making me cringe: I've never written mpreg before, or omegaverse, or for the Hannibal fandom -- honestly, I'm freaked out posting this - but I have a story to tell, and children were required to amp up the melodrama and absurd domestic/horror aesthetic that makes me so fond of the show.

Felix Culpa

Chapter Notes

> Will makes references in this part to being thankful for modern warfare - he means it both literally and ironically - but please don't let it offend you. It's a comment made within a certain context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was another visit from Doctor Hayes after the lunch cart came around, which involved a lot of picture cards and being told to arrange them in sequence to tell a story and so on. Will assumed that he performed pretty well, perhaps even displaying improvement from the last time he was tested, going by the satisfied smile on the beta's face. She informed him that he was scheduled to see an occupational therapist Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and to expect the man, a Joseph Conrad, to visit him tomorrow, who would see what he knew and teach him about everything from all the new Internet jargon to how to use the smart phones that everyone seemed to carry. As she was leaving, the doctor pointed out a timetable stuck to the wall that he hadn't even noticed which contained this week's schedule. According to that, besides the occupational therapist, his only other appointment was Doctor Bloom on Saturday.

He had a nap that afternoon, completely missed afternoon snacks, and woke to the heavenly smells of a homemade dinner. True to his word, Hannibal Lecter had returned. Their conversation was a strange blend of easy silences and light banter, as Will listened intently to the alpha's summary of newsworthy events that he needed to relearn. There's an undeniably flirtatious undertone to every interaction, but it's light enough that Will found it enjoyable rather than distasteful. Hannibal was witty and had a habit of saying the surprising.

At the end of the evening, he was asked if he needed anything.

"A professionally staged kidnapping," Will muttered with a wry smile, and then, "Sorry. I don't like hospitals."

Hannibal Lecter smiled like it was a perfectly reasonable request. "Allow me to rephrase that - what would you like for breakfast tomorrow? I'm afraid I'm all out of criminal contacts who do kidnappings."

Will stared at the table and shrugged; would he even remember making the request?

"Do you know if," he paused, "Is my father still alive?"

The alpha stared at him for a long beat and then nodded, "As far as I'm aware. You made it clear that you are not close. I believe you write to him occasionally."

Will nodded, relieved.

“Do you wish to see him?” Hannibal asked carefully.

Will shook his head, because they’d just argue and he was messed up enough without adding that into the mix. Did the old man know about the accident? Going on the decided lack of enthusiasm by Hannibal at the idea of a visit, the old man probably hadn’t endeared himself to the alpha when they had previously met. His guess was that the old man knew, but found it too much trouble to give a damn.

When Will woke up the next day, greeting Maya by name, spoke more about his condition with Doctor Hayes, and woke up again on Saturday morning, reciting that the president was Obama, it was 2015 and that he had steak for dinner last night, there’s an impromptu visit from Doctor Vaughn and his protégé, Doctor Lynch. They’re excited, already planning the by-line of their paper regarding the research possibility his case presents. They ask him to give an account on what's happened since Thursday morning, then request Will give them a layman's introduction on the importance of paraphilias in profiling a serial killer's MO, and finally pull out photographs, asking him to identify tools used to fix boat engines by name and function.

Will put up with it, because he knew that their excitement was a good thing, but it was exhausting and he needed a nap as soon as they broke for lunch. Doctor Bloom missed their appointment. Or maybe she had come in, decided to be a human being instead of a doctor, and left him to sleep.

When Will woke up the Sunday after, roused by the alarm on his new iPhone, ten days after waking up thirteen years into the future, aware of where he was and recalling what he had for lunch yesterday and that his Saturday appointment with Doctor Bloom had been moved to this afternoon, he asked Hannibal to bring him cinnamon donuts next time and broached the topic of being discharged.

“If your progress continues and reasonable precautions are taken for your safety, I see no reason why you should not be home.”

There’s a possessiveness to the way that the alpha grasped his shoulder as he collected Will’s dirtied plate.

Will wasn’t sure that going home with the man – he could already predict the ostentatious monstrosity of a townhouse that Hannibal would own – was a good idea. However it was better than here, a revolving door of neurologists and medical professionals waltzing in and out to prod and stare at him. The idea of returning to the real world, to his previous life, made him anxious though, like an itch under his skin he couldn't scratch. No matter how much he trusted his impression that Hannibal Lecter was in love with him, or at least who he thought Will was, and could be more or less be trusted, he was still a stranger.

Waking from his midday nap in preparation for his appointment with Doctor Bloom, Will jerked upright immediately at the sensation of being watched. The intruder, a tall heavy-set black man with a grizzled beard and tired eyes, looked up from his clasped hands, his frame

folded uncomfortably into a visitor's chair. He reeked of alpha, something sharp yet mellow – like alcohol left out to burn – and teleported his guilt with every twitch and shift.

"Hello Will."

"Hello."

Sighing heavily, the man stood. "I heard you were doing better."

Will tried not to flinch as the alpha approached him, shoes scraping along the floor as he broadcasted each step he made and keep his hands firmly tucked into his coat pockets. It's not clear whether he was wary of Will or of spooking Will. He should be sweating in the coat, but made no move to take it off, his eyes staring off the left of Will's face, ready to bolt at a moment's notice.

Interesting. Usually, it was the other way around.

"*Are* you doing better?"

Will stared at him and let the evidence whisper to him. Whoever this was, this alpha was or had been a federal agent – *colleague*? *No*, not quite – acquaintance then? No, the man had paternal feelings towards him, and he took it personally that Will was suffering a memory disorder. So, someone higher up on the command chain, someone he directly reported to but not on the teaching staff.

"Do I know you?"

His question elicited a grimace, but the man rallied on and smiled, poorly in Will's opinion.

"Get better, Will, you've been out of the game too long," he said, without explanation, and then left.

Will slumped back against his pillows, and placed the odd visitation down in the *must-investigate-further* list.

When Doctor Bloom finally made their appointment, she came in quietly, leaning against the doorway to watch Will fiddling with the iPad device Hannibal had brought in – it belonged to Will, apparently, and Conrad had happily shown him how it worked on Friday, though it confused him why he had one when there were still perfectly good laptops available – to give him a better sense of the world he would be walking into. He would have missed her arrival entirely, engrossed in scrolling through the news headlines of years past, except for the faint scent of her – wholesome, like roasted chestnuts or a stalk of ripe golden corn – announced her presence.

"Hey," she grinned, "I hope I'm not interrupting."

The fresh-faced female beta in a forest green dress, coat and knee-high boots was exactly what he'd imagined based on Hannibal's descriptions, and Will relaxed in the face of her smile, her uncomplicated joy at meeting him. Even the knowledge that she was probably observing everything about their afternoon together for later scrutiny didn't annoy him – for a therapist, she felt...different.

"No, come in, I'm reading the news - I'm up to January 2006."

"What's happening?"

"Coal mine explosion in West Virginia. There's miners trapped underground."

"I think I remember that."

Putting down the tablet, Will tugged self-consciously at the hem of his shirt and stood to greet her. He had been making an effort to wear regular clothes for the past week, especially for the almost-daily breakfasts with Hannibal, but this was the first time he'd purposely dressed up for someone. Will wanted to leave; badly enough that he'd actually contemplated wearing a tie before vetoing it, because this wasn't a job interview – even if it kind of was.

"Doctor Alana Bloom," she said, "Please, call me Alana."

"I know."

She grinned and placing a familiar canvas bag on the table, drew out a peacoat that was obviously not hers. "What do you say we go for a walk?"

Will tried not to be too eager, but it was obvious she knew how badly he wanted out, and was trying to do a good deed. The general good mood must have been infectious, because soon they're strolling arm in arm through the quadrangle gardens, cut through with footpaths for employees and patients to make a shortcut between the buildings, talking like old friends.

"Isn't this a conflict of interest?" He asked, curious.

"I'm not your primary physician, and even if I was, I wouldn't call us friends so much as friendly," she admitted, almost painfully honest. "We worked together a few times so I guess we're colleagues – I consult regularly for the FBI – and I've been invited to a few dinners."

They didn't talk about the work that Will collaborated on, though it's on the tip of her tongue. It must have been sufficiently traumatizing, because he caught a flicker of guilt as she mentioned that though he generally stuck to teaching about profiling, he did consults for the BAU – Behavioral Analysis Unit – and in case he didn't know, that was the new name for the old Behavioral Science division.

Will decided that he liked her. She was honest, not in the sense that she never told a lie, but that she had well-defined limits - she would never present herself as a friend when she was a foe, would never stab him in the back, and could be trusted to do her best by him. Though Hannibal talked a lot, Will wasn't always sure he was getting the truth – because at the end of the day, the alpha had a vested interest in how the chips fell. Hannibal was hiding things –

and made it obvious that he was hiding things. Will liked to think that he was ready for the harder truths, and that Alana Bloom's mix of patient-oriented concern, general pragmatism, and forthrightness would be the ideal manner of delivery.

"You've been talking to Hannibal, I hear."

More like Hannibal talked, and he listened, lobbing the occasional question to keep things organic. Besides a tiny frown – more concern for him than consternation at his silence – she continued on, "He's really excited with your progress. We all are."

Was that a royal '*We'* or was Alana referring to actual people?

"How did you two meet?" He asked, not sure he wanted to listen to the doctor tell him how lucky he was to have *such a caring, doting mate* – he had enough of that from the nurses.

"He was my mentor."

That connection had transformed into a friendship, Will inferred; she was the only person given a character reference by Hannibal. He would think they were having an affair except everything he read off the both of them was more mutual admiration than latent attraction. And also, now that he had met her, he knew that Alana would rather be thrown off a building that do something so *crass*.

"He thinks highly of you."

"And I think highly of him," Alana replied easily. "He's a good man, and was a very good mentor."

"And a good cook."

The smile won from Alana for his compliment/indirect agreement to her assessment of Hannibal produced a dangerous desire in Will to please her with more answers. He tried to put it down as an omega instinct to cooperate and please, but really, it was just nice to see a happy face – Hannibal's smiles were different, complex with intimate meaning that Will found too much to stomach without feeling guilty; he didn't want to encourage the man by smiling back.

"A very good cook," she agreed, almost coy.

They walked a little more until finally, she led him off the path and rounded several trees to an alcove hedged in by trees and shrubs. She sat down on the stone bench and patted the spot beside her, then began to ask him a series of standardized questions about his general state of mind. When they're done, Will asked if she could tell him more about his life. She seemed surprised by his request.

"I'll try, though really, Hannibal would probably be a better person to talk to."

He is your mate after all, the pinch between her brows said.

“There are things he shouldn’t have to explain to me,” Will said, going with the answer most likely to get her talking. Alana Bloom nodded after a moment, and set both her feet flat on the ground as if to brace herself.

“What do you want to know?”

Everything. Just *everything.*

Will knew it wasn’t in him to be mercenary, and he was too poor an actor to go through with marrying for money. And so far, as much as he enjoyed Hannibal Lecter’s company – the guy fed him, and actually smiled whenever Will made an off-color joke, so honestly, what’s not to like – it wasn’t exactly love-at-second-sight. It didn’t help that he had the mentality of a twenty-four year old and found the perceived age-difference unsettling. He knew that something must have clicked between them all those years ago, or he wouldn’t be here.

“Was I happy?” He didn’t use ‘we’ and he knew that it would be noticed. At the corner of his eyes, the specter of Hannibal Lecter glance over with a carefully blank expression of hurt.

Alana breathed out as though relieved – Will wondered what terrible question she had been imagining to get worked up like that.

“Yes,” she said with deep conviction, though her smile was strained, “You were happy.”

Will cocked an eyebrow at the silent ‘*but*’ floating in the air between them like a bad smell.

Smile fading, Alana fixed him with a serious solemn look. “Do you remember the accident?”

Will shrugged. “I was on the interstate, there were skid marks from another car at the scene but no evidence of collision; it’s assumed I lost control of my vehicle, but they're not sure why. Likely guess was there was wildlife on the road and I tried to avoid it.”

He watched her carefully and hid his confusion at her clear avoidance of his gaze; she was acting as though his recount of the official police report was some horrid admission of trauma. Will frowned, “Was...there something going on?”

Her lips pursed as she mulled over the words in her mouth.

“You were consulting on several controversial cases,” and doing it against her recommendation, considering how conflicted she was about it. “You were under a lot of pressure,” she paused, “Too much pressure. You started behaving erratically, became unwell and there were–”

Alana Bloom held back the rest of what she intended to say. Will could see it was choking her though. She wanted to tell him, every terrible detail, but her sense of duty to him was stronger than her need to reveal all. It wasn’t just generalized compassion either, he could tell that she felt personally responsible for whatever was going on that led – at least in her opinion – to the car accident and his current memory disorder.

“When you had the accident, you were still recovering from a severe case of Galinthy’s sickness, due to an untreated viral inflammation in your brain. The infection developed over

the course of several months, and wasn't found until you were institutionalized for depression – at least that's what we thought it was."

Will froze because *no*, no, no, *what?* Galinthy's sickness was a condition that only affected omegas suffering from a serious illness when they conceived – an immune response of the omega's body desperately sacrificing whatever it could to hang onto the fetus and carry to term.

"I have a child?" He asked over the rising ache in his chest.

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Alana Bloom smiled ruefully into the distance. "You have four children."

Will breathed in slowly as he dropped his head and then exhaled into his hands, a chuckle dry as bones – because seriously *this was not happening*. He wrapped his arms around his ribs and ignored the concerned glance this drew from her, rocked to his very core by the knowledge that he was a father, that there were children, *four* in fact, waiting for him – and *some doctor* had decided to keep it from him.

Suddenly Hannibal's almost painfully solicitous behavior made sense, and a dozen details that Will had noticed but chosen not to pursue; *always one detail* that ruined the otherwise immaculate suits worn; that *one fingernail* tinted blue – his mind had leaped to the conclusion that someone had colored it in with a blue marker, but it hadn't made sense and so he'd ignored it; the alpha's work day starting at ten in the morning and finishing at four in the afternoon, yet he would never arrive until after 8pm for dinner despite the fact dinner prep could not possibly take *four entire hours*.

He closed his eyes, and wondered how Hannibal put up with it, eating dinner and making small talk with him day after day, making the effort to bring breakfasts, when all he must want was to rewind time and have everything back to the way it was. Will tittered on the edges between bittersweet joy at the idea of having a family and a nausea-inducing sense of violation. Tell me about them, he wanted to demand, how old were they, what were their names? Did they understand what had happened? Did they miss him? Did they blame him?

Alana clasped his shoulder in a move to comfort, face carefully arranged to display only calm concern, though her brows were furrowed in deep worry. "That wasn't an attempt to goad you into a quicker recovery."

Will rubbed his eyes, suddenly annoyed because *how the hell* was he supposed to respond except to do everything in his power to get out of here. It rubbed him wrong that she acted as though this revelation should be shocking in a terrible way, like it would derail his progress, when it was something wonderful and made him eager to run out of here, live a normal life, never mind the worrying gap in his memories. Two weeks ago, Will was on his own and lonely, living in the attic of an omega boarding house, and quietly resigned that he was going to die a statistical anomaly – unmated omega, no children. *Now everything was different.*

"When can I see them?"

"Soon," she gave a small smile, her disquiet settling down as he remained calm.

Will nodded and let a smile stretch out his mouth, a cautious expression of delight at unexpected good news that he had seen once on someone's face; any other reaction would only get his discharge date pushed back. He tucked his hands into his pockets, and let a hand press up against his abdominal scar, suddenly understanding what it was; the evidence of triumph, and life.

Alana beamed at him.

“It’s going to be okay,” she told him, and stood up, reassured by his smile and ready to end the session.

Will wasn’t surprised when Hannibal showed up the next morning, reserved and shame-faced though probably no one else would be able to tell. Since the two of them must discuss him regularly, it was probably *killing* him to not say anything about what Alana had revealed yesterday. What a thought – four in thirteen years. They had been busy. He’d be impressed if his stomach wasn’t rolling around, disconcerted that Hannibal Lecter had seen him at his most vulnerable raw state, and Will hadn’t even seen the man’s ankles.

The alpha finally caved when Will finished the last bit of bacon.

“Tomas is twelve,” he said, mildly, as if he wasn’t flinging emotional bombs in Will’s direction, “We were thinking of sending him to Switzerland for summer school next year, and joining him towards the end for a tour of Italy.”

Will rested the tills of his fork turned down upon the table and mirrored the alpha’s pose, hands clasped before him, plate off to the side. Hannibal Lecter’s eyes were a light clear brown in the wane morning light. Will shifted his gaze to the man’s hands. They were tanned and scarred, oddly elegant with long tapered fingers; an image came to him, unbidden, of those fingers buried in his hair. It sent a shudder down his spine.

“Do they know about what’s wrong with me?”

“They know that you are *sick*,” Hannibal gave him a significant look, “and that you are recovering.”

Will felt a sudden crushing fear that he’d wake tomorrow, believing himself to be twenty-four and still in New Orleans, and force everyone to go through all this again. He must have given himself away because the alpha stood and rounded the table to crouch by his side. There’s a cautiousness to the way he placed his hand upon the jut of Will’s knee, as though he expected to be rebuffed and accepted it. Will glanced at the hand, so solid and real, and wondered if it wouldn’t just be easier to give in.

“How are they?”

“They miss their father,” Hannibal murmured, and tilted his neck to catch Will’s eyes, “But they know that you would be with them if you could be, and that you’re doing everything you can to come home.”

Will flicked his gaze to the far corner of the room to avoid the eyes but forced himself to place his hand upon the one on his knee. Hannibal turned his hand palm up and met him halfway, the edges of his mouth subtly turned upwards.

“I want to go home.”

“And you will go home, as soon as we can put in place some safeguards.”

“*When*?” Will ground out.

The alpha shook his head, exasperated. “Will, you cannot expect to go from crawling to running marathons.”

Frustration rolled over his shoulders, and he jerked his hand away in a fit of pique, pleased when this caused Hannibal’s face to fall from that *stupid* dopey expression. He had thought that this one was different but *alphas*, they were all the same in the end. How it must stroke the man’s ego, all that sympathy; oh the *poor* man, so *strong*, so *dependable*, so *devoted* to his omega who went off the rails and crashed the car; he was so kind he didn’t force his omega to quit his job; absolutely brilliant but oh so damaged, but that’s the curse of all brilliant omegas, such unstable needy souls; how *lucky* for him, to have the care of such an *esteemed* alpha; oh thank *goodness* the children weren’t in the car–

Will jerked out of the descending spiral of spite, his mind supplying an image of a mangled car with five bodies with enough vividness to make him ill. He stopped Hannibal from standing with a hand on the arm.

“Sorry,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, “*Sorry*, I don’t know what - sorry.”

A smile broke over the man’s face, and tentatively, he reached out and cupped Will’s face, his palm dry and surprisingly rough.

“There is nothing to apologize for – it’s good to see your fighting spirit coming back,” Hannibal smiled, the light of it reaching his eyes and creasing the edges, “And, you should *always* feel safe to express your views to me, never forget that.”

Am I safe, really?

Will raised his eyes to *see* but the alpha pulled away and got to his feet. Hands experienced with kneading dough and rubbing exotic spices into flesh began to rub his shoulders, cautiously at first and then with broad comfortable strokes when Will didn’t buck off the alpha’s gentling. It felt nice, and smoothed away at his ire until it gleamed dully, distilled into something solid for keeping.

“I believe I can convince Doctor Hayes to release you in a few days, on the grounds that you continue psychotherapy and remain monitored for a few months. It’s not just your safety we

have to be concerned with if you were to have a relapse."

Please don't leave again, it would be utterly devastating to me and the children.

Will swallowed down the dull ache of guilt that bubbled up from his solar plexus and let himself be lulled by the steady constant pull-drag-push-squeeze of Hannibal's hands. At one point, he allowed his head to be tilted back, let fingers splay across the base of his throat as Hannibal's thumbs pressed at the sides of his neck. It's a weighty gesture of trust on the part of an omega; and going by the quickening of Hannibal's breathing, he knew too how significant this was.

"Tell me about them."

It took a few moments for Hannibal to collect his thoughts, but when he finally spoke, the words came flowing out of him, controlled by the cadence of his speech so that each detail could be reveled in and lovingly fitted into the effigies being built within Will's mind, mere surrogates to tie him over until he was face to face with them.

Tomas was the eldest, an omega; he reminded them so much of Will at times it was uncanny; he loved playing the cello, loved music in general actually, and wanted to apply for the conservatory in Vienna in a few years. He was quiet, enjoyed his own company, was often practicing his craft or reading historical fiction, and could be discovered lost in his own head. He was also often surprisingly pragmatic, a hard-worker willing putting in the long hours of practice to achieve his dreams.

Elizabeta was six, precocious, undeniably alpha, and while she was attending piano classes she had no aptitude for it ("She tends to be very forceful," Hannibal admitted, disgustingly fond when what he really meant was that she banged on the keys like they were drums – Will could already see her, unruly dark tresses, bright-eyed with a mouthful of shark's teeth) and preferred to be running around outside. She was bossy and often became sullen to get her way, but had started to negotiate and compromise. Also, she wanted a pony.

Micah was four, a little alpha boy who enjoyed dress-ups, full of zest for life and in possession of a joyful happy disposition. His daily staples were a button-up and tie, as well as a child-sized messenger bag so he could be like *daddy*. However, he refused to cut his hair because he had enjoyed being Thor this Halloween ("Fictional film character, based on a comic book according to Tomas – an alien being who was the original basis for his namesake, the Thor of Norse mythology. The character has chosen to serve Earth as a protector in penance for some wrong," Hannibal explained in the face of Will's bewilderment) and wanted to be Thor again next year. Hannibal was confident that he would grow out of it, just like his refusal to eat anything green in case it was poisoned when he was three.

Hannibal Junior was eighteen months old, had just begun to walk on his own, and absolutely loved clambering up and down stairs, and would emphatically yell NO at anyone who tried to help him on said stairs. There was an ongoing battle of mock slap fights between him and Elizabeta, so they suspected he was to be alpha as well. He enjoyed scribbling with the purple crayon – just purple thank you – playing high-five with anyone who'd spare a palm, and was extremely clingy right now, disorientated by his growing awareness of scent as his secondary senses started to develop.

It literally hurt to hear this, even if his heart felt lighter than it had probably ever been his entire life.

“Don’t you have patients to see?” Will asked from within the daze that had fallen over him from the gentling.

“I cancelled my appointments for the morning.”

Will snorted - because, really, rich people. It seemed to amuse the alpha.

“I would spend every day here with you if I could, and yes, Alana helped me see that I should be here for you today.” Hannibal ended the impromptu gentling session with a caress on the back of Will’s head, “But I know that you would be very disappointed with me if I were to neglect the gifts you gave me.”

Gifts.

Such a revealing turn of phrase, Will cocked his head to the side, the masks sliding to reveal a new disguise.

A few centuries ago, an alpha would have seen children as their right, a show of their virility and as such, an extension of their ego in the universal pissing contest all alphas engaged in. In the modern era, post-industrial revolution, post-Great War, with betas making up the majority and making the rules (God bless modern warfare and the French Revolution – alphas were fast, tough and natural warriors but a gun was faster and easier to weld) alphas had to play nice. No more carrying off the omega you desired and doing whatever the hell you wanted – it was a beta’s world, and betas, with their historically lower rates of fertility and higher rates of child mortality, considered children to be *gifts*.

Hannibal Lecter, for all his sophistication, fancy schooling and money, *was an orphaned alpha* who lost his parents painfully, knew poverty intimately, lived among betas all his life and had suffered the loss of a child – a sibling most likely. Will stared the man’s sharp features with new eyes.

The alpha unbuttoned his jacket and sat down to regard their cold half-eaten breakfasts with distaste.

“Coffee?”

Will silently held out his cup.

When they both had drinks in hand, Hannibal held up a finger and reached into the canvas bag to pull out a light teal box, the kind of waxed cardboard container that the nicer food shops would use. “Six cinnamon donuts, as requested.”

Will broke into a chuckle and rubbed his face in chagrin, “I totally forgot.”

“Then it’s a good thing I didn't,” Hannibal gave him a teasing smirk, ridiculously pleased with his really very unsubtle memory-loss references.

The alpha opened the box with a practiced flick of his wrist and placed it before him. “It’s better fresh, I’m told – and this shop is apparently the best for such things.”

Will tried one and had to admit it was good. This branched into a conversation about why Hannibal was not going to eat one of those things, and no, he could not be convinced. Only the freshest, healthiest and most rarefied would do for this gourmand; why, he would hunt all his meat in person if his schedule permitted. Will cocked his head to the side and tried really, *really* hard to imagine Hannibal dressed in camouflage with a canvas sunhat on. There's a frankly painful pun made about ‘holes’ in nutritional requirements.

For a moment, Will could see how he might have been happy for these thirteen years past.

"Your contributions to the dinner table are also appreciated, when they happen."

Will made a face and took another donut, "I'm pretty sure I can burn water."

"That's true," Hannibal smirked, "but you are an excellent fisherman."

Chapter End Notes

I love it on the show when there's one dialogue and two conversations, I seriously fangirl that stuff so hard.
Also, the children are in the story for a reason, they're not for fluff
Well, not only - their names and most details about them are meaningful to the plot. As Will would say, they are evidence of a life lived.

Terra Incognita

Chapter Notes

FLUFF. Just oh my gosh so much fluff. I find Hannibal's house in the show comforting - it's so insulated from the world in a way, and I think Will would like that quality about it too. As always, puns and foreshadowing, though unfortunately this chapter isn't really plot-driven
Thank you so so much to everyone who has read and left kudos or comments

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By Tuesday evening, Hannibal had secured the cooperation of the doctors via bribery, emotional blackmail and huffing about his impeccable professional credentials, then corralled them all into agreeing via phone tag that Will would be discharged on Saturday after morning rotations. It's impressive enough that Will was impressed. Though it would be disturbing if the alpha welded that formidable charisma of his for more nefarious purposes.

An odd peace settled over him after that, and he counted down the days by focusing on his daily mental exercises and mandated activities, determined to not give anyone an excuse to hold him a moment longer. At night in his dreams, lost among the grasses tall and wild, whispering with each shift of the wind, Will sat in his high-back chair weighed down by the baby in his arms and smiled across a flickering campfire to see their faces emerge from the darkness – his firstborn, his daughter, and the third-born, his alpha son, cradled by the arms of his mate – as they leaned closer to bask in the warmth.

When Friday rolled around, Alana Bloom made an impromptu visit bearing dinner and gifts from Hannibal, who called to apologize for his absence; there was an emergency with one of his clients, and he was required in person – a most delicate touch was required if he hoped to walk away with something good out of the carnage. Will nodded and told him he was sorry to miss out on their chat tonight, even though he didn't really, because he appreciated the alpha's thoughtfulness in sending over a suitcase so he wouldn't have to walk out tomorrow with his things in those ugly lavender plastic bags given out by the hospital. Opening the suitcase, Will found it filled with a complete outfit – of course, something fresh for his homecoming, nothing less for Doctor Lecter's mate.

"Have I remembered everything?" Hannibal asked over the phone.

Will looked down at the suitcase sitting on his bed and nodded, letting his smile be seen by Alana who was unpacking their dinner. "Yes it's fine, thanks. And thanks, for dinner."

"You're welcome; it gives me great pleasure to cook for you," Hannibal said meaningfully, "Bon appétit."

Dinner was a stir-fry with beautifully prepared strips of beef, and rice seasoned with toasted sesame; lighter fare than usual, but Will saw the discernment and care gone into the dishes; there would be zero chances of indigestion after eating his dinner tonight, and he should be able to get a good night's sleep. Well, provided his nerves didn't get the better of him.

"You're looking good."

"I hope so," he gestured at the meal, "being fed like this."

The grin that Alana gave him, slow and sly, made him wonder again why they didn't become friends.

"So, you all set for tomorrow?"

Will nodded and decided to save her the repetition, "I have your phone number on speed dial just in case, Doctor Bloom, please, stop worrying."

She raised her eyebrows, bemused by his sardonic little eye roll, "My apologies."

They ate for several minutes in silence, before Alana expressed her astonishment that Hannibal could make something as mundane as a stir-fry taste so good.

"Has he told you about the dinner parties?"

Will shook his head, then listened with fascination at her descriptions of the exquisite dishes executed by Hannibal – apparently, the yearly Lecter Christmas party was *the event* of Baltimore town on the December weekend it was held, and no one had ever turned down an invitation short of death and amputation. Last year, there had been a starter with homemade prosciutto whirled into delicate roses, laid on top of honeydew, cantaloupe and watermelon sliced thinly into squares and arranged in a fan shape like some three-tone color palette, then the guests had been served arugula salad with slices of roasted duck and sour plum jelly flecked with gold dust, all resting upon original 19th century serving dishes on loan from *Isshouan*, an extremely exclusive Japanese restaurant in D.C. whose proprietor was praised as a culinary genius in her field, and naturally, well-acquainted with Hannibal.

Will felt almost faint as the images drizzled and dripped behind his eyes; the flicker of candlelight against the walls; the clink of crystal goblets; Alana luminous with cascading tear-drop earrings in a royal blue gown entertaining her professional peers in one corner; and Hannibal standing at the head of the table, waving imperiously for everyone to be seated. There's a jolt as he saw himself, smiling and relaxed, sitting down at Hannibal's right hand, and turning to greet the blushing beta who had been assigned the seat to his right. She's a promising young opera singer of gentle temperaments off-stage due to her humble origins, and she's utterly bedazzled by the sumptuousness of the evening; she would not bother Will during dinner, wary of committing a social faux pas with the mate of their illustrious host.

"Sounds..." Will blinked the images away, "unbelievable."

Alana speared another piece of bell pepper and beamed, obviously recalling the memory with mischievous delight. "You had ice sculptures of *flamingos*."

Will raised his eyebrows, and took a desultory bite of celery. Considering Hannibal's love for double meanings, there was probably some significance to the outlandish choice – a thought sparked of Alice down the rabbit hole, fitting her hands tightly around a flamingo club and raising it above her head to swing. Before more images could coalesce, Will found himself shaken out of his mental space by a shrill ringing noise.

Alana exhaled sharply as she picked up her handbag, rifling through it till she found her cell phone. She frowned down at the caller ID.

"Hello," she answered, face blank.

A tinny voice, female and husky, spoke very rapidly – no introductions necessary, this was urgent. Will watched as Alana nodded tightly, made agreeing sounds, and at the end, promised to be there in an hour. Ending the call, she tucked the phone away in her pocket and sat back down.

"Sorry about that, I usually wouldn't answer my phone during dinner but that's my special tone."

Will raised his eyebrows, "Your special what?"

"Special tone – *ring*," she winced, "Sorry I mean special *ringtone* – for the FBI."

Will hide his curiosity and finished chewing his mouthful of rice, thoughtful. "It's almost eight o'clock," he pointed out, gesturing to the wall clock lazily with his fork, brows pinching as he gave her a confused smile, "On a Friday. Surely you can give your consultation during regular business hours."

She picked up her fork with a wry grin, almost exasperated, "Don't worry, Will, it'll keep - let's just enjoy our dinner and I'll be there in an hour."

So she was going to a crime scene.

That was interesting; it wasn't often that academics would get invited to active crime scenes for a consult – and so it had to be a special case, something which stumped the minds of those already working on it at the BAU. His finger drifted down the spines of all the crime headlines he'd perused and stopped on one particularly slippery creature, whose body of work spanned well over a decade, and whose sadism, meticulousness and resistance to being type-cast would merited such special treatment: the Ripper of Chesapeake Bay.

"You might be better off having dinner later," Will muttered, ducking his head down to avoid the hard glance she threw at him.

Alana Bloom, proving herself a better person than he, didn't yell at him or leave. "Probably, but the company here is better."

Saturday began wet and miserly, a grey haze settling over the city as seemingly endless rain dusted down. Will chose not to read into this as a sign and ate breakfast alone, good old plain oatmeal and juice, well past the stage of nerves and right into numb shock. He put up with the morning rotation visit, barely able to control his urge to ground his back teeth in consternation at the way the weekend doctor kept looking at him, eyes narrowed, as if to tell Will very clearly that he disapproved of his release. By the time Hannibal arrived, dressed in a dark green coat with grey lapels and so calm that Will wanted to put a fist through his teeth, the room had been stripped of his belongings, everything jammed unceremoniously into the roll-along, and he was stalking the hallways, thinking of rechecking the drawers for stray socks one more time to work off some tension.

“Will,” the alpha called out upon exiting the elevator, and strode towards him like an oncoming armada, dressed to the nines despite it being the weekend.

Will consciously squashed the urge to throw himself at the man for comfort, but didn’t shy away when Hannibal unfolded a coat from under his arm and helped him into it, hands squeezing his shoulders.

“Have you got everything?”

Will could only nod, too nervous to speak; he felt as though he had just agreed to parachute from a plane over enemy territory, with nothing but a map and the company of the stars.

“Good,” Hannibal smiled, smoothing down a lapel.

Will allowed his hand to be tucked into the crook of the man’s arm and escorted to the nurses’ station. There were two nurses behind the desk, weekend staff whom he generally didn’t have much interaction with. The male nurse, an omega, glanced at them from over the top of his mug, dark eyes flicking from Hannibal to Will and then back again.

“Doctor Lecter,” the beta woman greeted, her hair bright red and obviously fake. She was plump, wrinkled, and pushing sixty-five, but light on her feet as she stood up from the computer.

“Hello Christine,” the alpha inclined his head, ever polite. Will realized that he’d heard of her, because Hannibal had brought her fancy chocolates last weekend in honour of her thirty-five years as a nurse here. She’d stopped by and offered him a piece while telling him that he was lucky to have such a wonderful husband. “How are the grandchildren?”

“Please, don’t ask,” Christine rolled her eyes and slid the discharge papers over the counter. “Here you go – Doctor Hayes has already signed off on it, if you could just sign here... lovely. There, you’re free to take your husband home.”

“Thank you, Christine, you are a wonder.”

She beamed at the compliment and waved them off, “Get out of here and don’t let me see your face around again, okay?”

Realizing that the instructions were for him, Will raised his eyes from the edge of the counter and smiled with sweet Jessica's smile, "You won't."

It's startling cold outside and Will began to shiver as soon as they stepped out from the portico. Noticing his discomfort, the alpha pulled out the scarf tucked into his coat pocket and stopped to put it around Will's neck. The smell of the fine wool, all alpha smoke and spice, calmed some of his nerves and he touched the back of Hannibal's hand in wordless thanks.

The man picked up the suitcase and offered his elbow with smirk. "It would be unfortunate if you were to slip and hit you head now that we've finally broken you out – let's not tempt fate."

Will gave a huffy chuckle and let himself be escorted to an expensive-looking black town car parked in the fifteen-minute spot. Hannibal opened the passenger side door for him and made sure that the tail of Will's coat was inside before shutting it, going around to slide the suitcase into the trunk. The sudden silence of the car was jarring after the past fortnight of endless background noise, and he held his breath in the oppressive vacuum till the driver-side door clicked open. Hannibal slid in, and started the engine.

Baltimore passed Will in a blur of greys and reds, the mist dusting down over everything, making the colors run in rivulets like a monotone Pollock with the occasional speckling of a bloody Seurat. Most of the car models on the road were unfamiliar, but since he's never been here before, Will found the city somewhat familiar, in the way that all urban spaces were anywhere. Next to him, Hannibal kept quiet, smiling whenever Will looked over but otherwise completely focused on the drive.

"I hope you're hungry, as we will have an early lunch," he said, upon turning off the main road into a residential street. "Marie will be at the house today, to help you settle in."

Will nodded, feeling odd that they apparently had a French housekeeper but grateful for any assistance at all. The alpha reached over and took his hand, giving it a squeeze.

"Do not push yourself, Will, you have no responsibilities except to continue recovering. Marie will be at the house from early till two on weekdays, and Irene will be available in the afternoons to drive you to your appointments and help you with the children until you're permitted to drive."

Will nodded, recalling that Irene was a beta girl enrolled in a Child Psychology program, whom Hannibal had charged with waiting at the school gates in the afternoons to greet the children and either take them home or deliver them to their after-school activities (*no detail too small*, his mind supplied, *the devil is in the details*). It was all too much, in his opinion – when he was a kid, the old man had usually left for work before he was even up, and didn't come home until Will was ready for bed – but then he supposed that this was how things were in regular alpha-omega-dynamic families.

Will glanced over at the man driving the car and tried to imagine what Hannibal was like at home, if he had daily chores to do; if he packed lunches and kept track of the school events; was the alpha distant, the father who patted heads but never stuck around to clean skinned

knees, or was he their favorite? They weren't new thoughts but never had it been so real before.

The drive took perhaps twenty-minutes, but felt closer to an hour, and Will felt his collar grow damp with sweat as the apartments disappeared and were replaced by houses that grew more expansive the more corners Hannibal turned, until they're in a neighborhood filled with houses that were like miniature forts – grand townhouses with wrought-iron fences and porticos and columns, flanked by ancient trees.

When they finally came to a stop in front of a three-story wheat-colored brick townhouse, Will had the door open before Hannibal even switched off the engine and wandered up the short path to the door, unable to wait for even a second longer. As if in answer, the door swung open and something small barreled out, heading straight for his legs. It was only quick reflexes from his days on the beat that enable Will to brace himself and fling out his arms to–

"Daddy!"

The child beamed up at him, tiny hands grabbing fistfuls of his coat sleeves, bare feet scrambling for purchase against Will's knees as if they were footholds to be scaled. Will felt faint as he stared down at the little alpha boy – all floppy blond hair, large brown eyes and open-mouthed grin.

"Are you better now?"

"Micah," Hannibal admonished, voice genial and fond, taking the suitcase from trunk, "Where are your shoes?"

"It's okay," Will breathed, almost shaking as he shifted his grip and lifted the little boy into his arms. Micah grinned at him, so happy – so, *so* happy . Will had to remind himself to breath, that this was real, that this child was *his*, "Hey Micah."

The child looked away, suddenly shy, but then changed his mind, burrowing into the side of Will's neck.

Hannibal passed them to put the suitcase inside and then came back, raising an eyebrow. "I see you have lost your socks as well," he said, tickling the little boy's feet. "Whatever shall we do?"

Micah jerked and let out a squeal of laughter for Papa to *STOP IT TICKLES*, then clung to Will's neck like he was the last pole standing in a torrential flood. Will shifted him onto a hip and pressed his nose to the little blond head, scenting his child. Hannibal threw him a conspirator's smile, and guided him off the front stoop into the house.

The door closed behind them with soft click, sealing out the world with its distractions.

There were wall scones in the atrium, all lit despite it being the morning, and though a million details called to him for attention, Will's eyes were blind as he followed Hannibal's lead down the corridor past closed doors and into what appeared to be a lounge; tasteful leather coaches and wooden furniture, modern with the occasional touch of the Old World.

There's a drumming beat as someone ran down the stairs somewhere, almost screaming in her glee. She barely paused for breath upon rounding the corner and tackled Will's other hip with a force that made him reel.

"Daddy," she cried and went silent, eyes closed in bliss.

Fingers trembling, Will laid his palm over the top of her head. She looked up at his caress and beamed at him, exploding with sheer unadulterated pleasure at his presence, his scent, his touch. She had his coloring – dark hair and chameleon blue eyes – but her face was her alpha parent's, all brooding cheekbones, sharp jawlines; she was going to be a gorgeous young woman one day. Elizabeta nuzzled up at his hand, rumbling utter satisfaction.

In the background, Hannibal excused himself and disappeared with the suitcase. Will nodded in a daze because he didn't care, too busy *staring* and being embraced, drowning in an excess of adoration so pure he could float on its fumes. It took him a moment to notice the quiet child in the corner but Will found himself staring when he finally glanced over.

Tomas, dark wavy-haired and hazel-eyed, freckles over the tip of his nose, smiled sweetly, his hands disappearing into the cuffs of his too-large jumper as he approached, silent on socked feet. "Hey dad."

"Hi Tomas," Will replied, mouth-dry.

The omega boy came closer and made it as if he were to hug Will but couldn't figure out how. Elizabeta made an exasperated noise and seizing her brother by the hem of his jumper, dragged him in and firmly threw her left arm around Tomas, squeezing them both till the firstborn was breathing into the middle of Will's back, forehead pressed tightly against his shoulder blade. *It's beautiful. So beautiful.* Will never wanted it to end.

"Well," Hannibal commented from the doorway, his coat and vest off with his shirt sleeves rolled up, "I can tell when I'm not wanted."

Will looked up and had to do a double take, having never seen the man so informal before.

"*Papa*," Elizabeta whined, obviously aggrieved to be accused of favoritism. It must be an on-going argument because she left Will's side and went to punch the alpha in the stomach. Hannibal caught her fist with a put-upon grimace and leaned down to murmur something in her ear. She nodded in solemn agreement and disappeared. Will resisted the urge to call her back.

Micah, doing his best to rub an impression of his face against Will's ear, finally decided he'd had enough now and struggled to be let down. "I need to use the fa-cilities," he announced carefully to the room before tearing away like he was being chased.

Hannibal beamed proudly and met Will's wry look with a tilt of his chin. *Have I done you proud, my love? Look at how they grow.*

Will looked away, uncomfortable.

There's a flurry of activity after that.

He was peeled out of his coat and scarf, shown to the bathroom to freshen up, then installed in the dining room where one entire wall was filled with rows of herbs growing out of built-in troughs. It's fantastical, *bizarre*, almost fairytale, and filled the air with a soothing smell – raw, green and earthy (*the wild grass trilled with every breath of wind stroking through them*). With the dark matte wallpaper and dim lights, Will felt as though he had entered a cave. Were all alpha-omega households like this or was it just them?

Elizabeta re-entered the room with a pitcher of tea cradled to her chest, lemon slices floating in among the flowers – chrysanthemums, if Will's guess was right – and placed it carefully atop on the table, before disappearing again only to return a moment later with another pitcher, trailed by Tomas who carried a wicker basket of props. They lay out the table for six, removing the chair next to Will and replacing it with a beautifully-crafted child seat made of wood, ducking and weaving around one another to lay out place-mats, napkins, forks, spoons and glassware. Elizabeta needed to get onto the tips of her toes sometimes to reach but bristled whenever her brother tried to help. Will watched them, amazed.

Finally, Tomas came to a stop by his side, back straight and confident, to pour him a glass of tea.

"It's chrysanthemum tea with raw honey and lemons," Elizabeta explained, "Papa said it's good for you."

Will smiled across the table as she hopped onto a chair –it was her regular seat, the cushion on it was perfectly placed for her height– and grinned, telling him about how he had missed her birthday but Daddy was excused because he was sick and still bought her a present; she loved the dress by the way, red was her favourite color now not green, and oh Daddy, thank you for making Papa invite the ponies to my party, everyone loved them. Tomas raised his brows at Will as he filled the other glasses as if to say, *see what I must put up with daily?*

Will choked down a laugh, knowing that it would turn into sobs.

"Tomas, Eli," Hannibal said, appearing suddenly in the doorway. "Please wash up, and don't forget to help Micah."

Will caught a glimpse of an expansive kitchen behind the alpha before he's distracted by the reappearance of a familiar blond head, squeezing himself between the door and Hannibal's legs to fling himself at Will again. Elizabeta sighed in long-suffering and grabbed the four-year old by the arm as she marched past while Tomas brought up the rear, always the responsible one.

For the first time since he had arrived, Will was alone with the other man. Hannibal wordlessly began to place the knives – five naturally since it was them, Tomas and Eli, and the yet-to-be-introduced housekeeper Marie, who would need them. He's expecting it but Will still startled at the weight of the alpha's hands on his shoulder.

"How are you feeling right now?"

How do you think, Will wanted to drawl, but didn't because this man was the father of his children and deserved more than that (*He's a good man*, Alana Bloom smiled). He nodded and tilted his head to press a cheek on the man's wrist, baring his throat.

Hannibal smiled and with a final squeeze, passed him to place the final knife before he turned to the opposite end of the room and said, "Ah Marie, right on time."

Will twisted around to see a willowy woman, at least sixty-years old with cropped hair fashionable in another era, pass the fussy toddler in her arms over. His breath caught, mesmerized as Hannibal Junior rubbed a clumsy fist over his eyes, yawning expansively into his namesake's shoulder. Will froze when without any warning, Hannibal came over and placed the child in his lap. For a moment, he panicked, uncertain where to put his hands but then Junior struggled onto his feet, fingers digging painfully into Will's arm, and proceeded to stare at him, fascinated.

Will smiled, almost cross-eyed, and the toddler smiled back, recognizing the scent of Will even after all this time.

The moment was broken by the sound of the other children returning. Micah attempted to reclaim his place on Will's lap and pouted up at the sight of the interloper – Hannibal Junior was not moved by his brother's plight and fisted the collar of Will's shirt in defiance. The four-year old was thankfully distracted from his upset by Tomas' hand on his head and allowed himself to be led to his seat, clambering up with cat-like agility and sitting primly atop his cushions with a cheeky grin, smug to have rights to the seat opposite Daddy. Hannibal waltzed into the room and tutted at the boy's still bare toes and began to serve the soup course; it was liverwurst and onion soup. Tomas disappeared off somewhere, apparently having been the last person to see said lost shoes and socks.

It's normal, and frightfully domestic in a way that thrummed at something deep in the core of him, an instrument long-ignored and left to dust now lovingly restored.

Will turned as someone took the seat on the other side of the high chair. Marie, pleasant-faced, wrinkled and smelling of the faded sun, a beta past her prime, smiled warmly at him. "Welcome home," she told him, her French-accent noticeably strong.

She was a widow, a beta woman of meager beginnings, but her sensibility and deportment had given her a chance to marry outside of the small country town she was born in, leading her ultimately to the United States. She didn't enjoy English, but she spoke it just fine, and she adored Will by proxy, because she adored Hannibal – what a gentleman, a *proper* noble alpha just like in the novels – and loved these children as if they were her own flesh and blood.

He nodded his thanks, oddly touched.

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Lunch was comfortably casual, in a way that his meals with Hannibal never really were, despite their ostentatious surroundings. With the children as buffers between them, the conversation drifted from how much Elizabeta hated piano classes and wanted to end them now to why couldn't she quit now if she was going to start archery in the spring (yes, Will was noticing a pattern), with Micah piping in with humming as he ate his lunch, cut up by Hannibal who kept one eye on him at all times. Surely her time could be better invested, Elizabeta implored, using words that seemed very out of place in her girlish voice, and looked to Daddy for support. Will glanced at the alpha for directions; Hannibal stared back with unguarded affection.

Will took a drink of the tea, it's sweet floral notes calming down his spike of disorientation.

Across the table, his daughter pouted and competently sawed her way through the crisp crackling of the roast pork – they're going with a German theme today for lunch, something simple and hearty to ward off the November chill. She ate it delicately, a sharp contrast to her usual wild energy, and Will was struck again by how well-manner they were, even Micah who tried his best to emulate his siblings, never using his hands on the food except when he was in danger of dropping it. He'd always look so shocked and upset at the food clutched in his fist, until Hannibal cleaned it off and placed a new piece of meat/vegetable on his plate with words of encouragement.

"Comment est le repas?" Marie asked.

What followed was a rapid-fire conversation in French between Tomas and the elder woman, which Will barely understood. Elizabeta seemed interested but her only comment on the matter was to thank Papa for lunch in carefully pronounced French, because it was delicious as always and *no one* else made roast pork like Papa. *It's...*

Will had no words.

This was a scene straight out of some glossy magazine. He felt like the poor cousin invited over for brunch who was afraid to tell them that he didn't know if he should hang onto his cutlery for the next course or let them take it. But no one was the slightest bit phased by him, not when he almost knocked over his glass of water (Hannibal's hand shot out to right it) nor when he made a mess trying to eat a piece of pork he hadn't quite sliced off properly (Micah and Elizabeta giggled, everyone else was amused; *oh Daddy, you're always the same*) folding him into their world easily. They were confident, assured of their place because they were loved without question, and even if Will didn't know it now, they would remind him of how much they had been loved by returning it to him.

It's heady, almost too good to be true, and Will let himself bask in it with fear and trembling.

"Oh, I almost forget – *papa*, can I go over to Riley's house tonight?"

"You haven't told me about this before."

She was undeterred by his stern frown, "She got *Frozen* on DVD for her birthday, and her parents said it was okay to invite someone over, and you *know* how I was sick when it was out in theaters and couldn't go."

"Will you not be watching it at her birthday party next weekend?"

"*No*," She wheedled, "She's having her party at Catmosphere Cafe, papa, *remember?*"

There's a beat of silence as alpha father and alpha daughter regarded one another in a staring contest, but then Hannibal softened, exasperated. "I shall call her parents – but next time, Eli, you must tell me at least two days in advance to arrange any social outing, especially now that your father is home and may have plans too."

"Sorry, daddy," she mumbled to Will, but obviously not sorry enough as she went back to dessert, content that she had gotten her way. Tomas was annoyed at her behavior but used to it now, and only gave the adults commiserating looks.

Whatever *Frozen* was, it was more interesting than Dad. Will felt bemused rather than hurt though, recognizing already that his daughter was independent, an alpha who required little soothing from him now she was six; it was enough for her just to know he was home where he belonged, for her love was not displayed on time spent together or hugs given, but how she would share herself with him unreservedly and protect him fiercely.

Will started to eat his dessert - blackberries suspended in cherry-flavored jello, a rather pedestrian option but cheerfully sweet.

"The pork was great, thank you for lunch, papa," Tomas said quietly.

The alpha beamed, "Thank you, Tomas, and thank *you* for dessert."

"I helped too," Micah exclaimed, on the verge of breaking into a pout.

"You did," Hannibal nodded imperiously, "thank you, Micah."

There's silence at the table for all of two seconds before Will realized he was required to say something too.

"Good job," he smiled over the lump in his throat.

Both positively glowed though Tomas tried to hide it, ducking his head to eat another mouthful of jello. Will felt...*important*, wanted, and so painfully, desperately responsible; *were they getting all their vitamins, were they sleeping, were they happy?* Content having received his due, Micah returned to mashing up the jello in the glass bowl and eating an occasional spoonful, his mouth and chin bloody.

Then lunch was over, and the room was abuzz with activity as everyone danced to a song that Will had forgotten to clean up, fold down, wipe off, and put away. He's directed upstairs into the children's bedroom with Micah and Junior for company. There's an afternoon of cuddling the toddler who wasn't interested in playing, too mesmerized by the scent of his omega father to care about anything except absorbing more of it; he nodded off within minutes. Micah's disappointed to lose his playmate, now that Daddy couldn't move with the baby sleeping on him, but consoled when Marie suggested that Will read to him as she came to say her goodbyes.

They settle down to a book about a cunning black cat who pretended to belong to six different people on the same street so he could have six dinners, then a story about a boy exploring a mysterious garden with beautifully-illustrated pencil drawings in monochromatic shading. At some point Tomas came in with mugs of spiced tea, fragrant and warming, and left to Will's disappointment only to return in spirit, hopeful low wails trembling down the corridor as he practiced the cello in his bedroom, door ajar as though he knew that Will would appreciate it. Micah remained content, squished up against his long-absent parent and drowsy from lunch, lost in the story as his childish imagination took them face to face with the antagonist of the tale, Abdul Gasazi.

Mid-afternoon, Hannibal came in to collect the empty mugs and apologized to Micah for needing to borrow Daddy. It's a little tiny detail, a throw-away courtesy, but Will could tell that Micah felt cherished by it. The alpha informed Will that he would be dropping off Eli to her play date a little earlier. That way, he could have the afternoon free to shop for groceries and work on his patient notes – he was thinking French-style fish soup for dinner, yes, made the way a certain little restaurant in Dusseldorf would do it. Will nodded, perfectly happy to live on toast and beans, but appreciative of the effort (*You were happy,* Alana Bloom smiled).

He continued onto the next book at Micah’s needling, something years old and well-read going by the marks and tears, about two best friends, an omega boy and beta girl who realized all the presidents were alphas or male betas, and decided that they would help each other run for president in the mock elections at school. Will wanted to give the author a standing ovation but settled for squeezing Junior a little closer; he was beginning to see why Hannibal Lecter had not been discarded like all the other alphas that had tried their luck.

With his head resting upon Will’s ribs, Micah drifted off.

Closing his eyes, Will drifted with him.

Chapter End Notes

Children's books were based on real children's books that I've read or read of, altered for omegaverse. The meal they had, German-style roast pork, it takes like five freaking hours to make, and the French-style fish soup made by some places in Dusseldorf is actually really awesome. I'm all for verisimilitude.
The Japanese restaurant mentioned is a fictional one, from a manga/tv show that I adore called 'Osen'
So about the fluff -- I wanted to plump up the domestic details for the sake of setting the tone and I needed to make the children real people rather than props cos their personality comes into play later in the story.
Also, I made Hannibal eat jello - seriously, give me a beer.
My chapter title is a shoddy Latin reference to Hamlet's little phrase 'the undiscovered country, from those who bourn, no traveler's return, puzzles the will, and make us rather bear those wills we have, than to fly to others we know not of'
Hannibal can get really highbrow sometimes okay - I feel pressure lol

Petit a petit...

Chapter Notes

> This story is -extremely- slow moving, though there will be sharper moments of intense action in later parts. I'd apologize but that's what the TV show was like --- so yes, you are in the slow part, so much waffling and talking and shuffling about; I enjoyed that about the show though (guilty glance around)
> Doctor Vaughn was written with Beau Bridges in mind
> Robert Papparella was based on Rossi from Criminal Minds

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was dark, cold and damp, and his thighs ached with each heave, his fingers ached with each clench, and his mouth just ached. The sky was cloudy, sliced through with silvery moonlight. He could see no more than an arm's length in front but he trusted his companion. The sound of his heartbeat was loud in his ear, all his senses alive in their natural environment, and he felt each lazy breath made by the creature bearing him. They slowed abruptly in their trek but he didn't question; he just laid down, prostrate over the warm back of the beast, adrenalin coursing untapped through his veins, and waited.

Then he saw it – *prey*.

The beast crouched – a flash of tiger stripes there and gone – and then exploded into action, tearing through the forest on hooves and claws, sliding between the trees like smoke. There's a blood-curdling roar, shrill and hissing, which drowned out everything but his heartbeat as they gained upon their chosen victim. He threw himself off, rolling to lessen the impact and sprang up to give chase while the beast veered to cut off their prey. His limbs, long-calcified by the cold, cracked out from their shells, rippling as they came alive to the call of the hunt.

The pitiful alpha shouted and cried as he ran and stumbled through the underbrush, bare and filthy with mud.

Will ran after him, powering through the motions but didn't bother to gain ground. The alpha was confused when he glanced back to check on his pursuer. What was happening? Why wasn't his pursuer trying to overtake him? A burst of energy warmed the old man's limbs because now he stood a chance of –

The antlers of the beast pierce their prey with a bone-snapping crunch, and raised the skewered body above his head in triumph. Blood sparkled through the air, dark diamonds chiming sweetly as they collided before being swallowed by the hungry earth. The stag with the sprint of a leopard and the thickness of a bull shook side to side till the human carcass tore off his spikes in an arc of blood and guts to land on the forest floor, *discarded*.

Will took a deep breath, satisfied.

The hunt was over. *Long live the beast.*

Then he was not in the forest anymore, but jerking awake, disorientated and breathing hard in an overly plush king-sized bed on the third-story, in the master bedroom of a Baltimore townhouse.

Will sat up, mouth acrid with fear, sweat dampening his brows, and saw that it was only just past 4AM. He swallowed, trying to not to gulp for air so as to wake his bed partner. He glanced over and reassured himself that the alpha was still there, turned away on his side and sleeping peacefully; Will resisted the desire to touch, to stretched out on his belly and hook a chin onto the man's shoulder and *breathe*.

Will wrapped his arms around himself and forced himself to stop breathing for a second, stop *thinking*, just *stop*. When he inhaled once more in need of oxygen, he focused on the sense-memory of Tomas' cello mournfully crooning and let it sink into his lungs, slowing the pace of his breathing until all he's left with was a vinegary aftertaste and a residual pounding in his ears.

Will cast his mind back, needing to reassure himself that this was not a relapse, that he remembered everything; Baltimore, thirty-eight years old, mated, four children, lecturer but on leave right now, car accident, thirteen years missing like someone took a bite out of his brain. Yes, he remembered.

He'd woken to brunch on Sunday and was introduced to the dogs who'd been kept overnight at a kennel service so as to not overwhelm him. He remembered being surprised at them, all misfits and not at all the pedigreed lapdogs he'd imagined when Hannibal first mentioned them owning pets. There's a scrappy little Jack Russell terrier named Nap (short for Napoleon), a retriever cross named Winston who had been a stray, and a half-deaf Basset Hound named Dee (short for *Concordia*, of all things). It was strange and yet, it felt *right*. Will had always wanted a dog, but never had the money or space – now, he had three.

They'd gone for a walk, the entire family plus dogs, and Will had suffered his first parental panic attack when Eli slipped off the monkey bars mid-swing due to the water left from Saturday's rain. The fall had injured her pride and vanity more than anything else, but as she'd sobbed on the muddy ground clutching at her bottom, Will almost hyperventilated. Hannibal had been uncaring of the damage to his expensive Italian shoes and immediately trudged through mulch and mud to scoop up the girl and consoled her. Within five minutes, she was up again and playing fetch with the dogs, making Will feel silly for how he'd reacted.

This was normal behavior, Hannibal had reassured him, children were remarkably resilient creatures; and Will appreciated the alpha not drawing attention to his overreaction. Tomas had agreed, though not quite in those words: Eli was a drama queen, and if something was actually wrong, she'd be quiet, not loud.

It didn't completely settle the nagging worry, but it helped.

Dinner had been casual with just two courses – potato soup Franconian-style with fresh bread and some homemade dry meats - including dessert, an elaborate Black Forest cake from a high-end patisserie. Micah had valiantly tried to go for seconds, but was thankfully persuaded to have another slice tomorrow on the promise that no one would *dare* touch his slice of cake, Papa promised.

He was then given a belated tour of the house, listened to Tomas give an embarrassed recitation of a little song he was working on, and then prepared for bed, settling Micah and Hannibal Junior down with a story and some cuddling, while Hannibal herded a hyperactive Elizabeta into pyjamas. Will pinched the bridge of his nose, uncertain and frustrated – he hadn't experienced a single night terror since waking up in the hospital, and he had no idea why they were back now. It had been *normal*, just an average Sunday.

Not to mention, it was the best weekend of your life in twenty-four plus years...

Slipping off the bed, Will crept from the room, his shadow casting a long swath across the walls and floorboards as he made his way downstairs. His bare feet stung with cold but he didn't care, needing to move and be away from Hannibal right now, even if the man was unconscious.

It had been awkward, being shown to the bedroom by Tomas on Saturday evening – *the master bedroom* – as if there would be no question of the sleeping arrangements. He was sure that none of the children truly understood what had happened to him, except perhaps Tomas – and the muted sadness that imbued every glance from the twelve-year old was enough to discourage Will from asking for the guest bedroom. God, he could only imagine the betrayal on Elizabeta's face if she realized that her Daddy had forgotten her entirely.

Thus, Hannibal and he were sharing the bed. Which was fine, as Will was a grown-up who could share a bed without making a fuss – and for crying out loud, they had four children together. It was strange though, falling asleep to the presence of another person – Will had always been alone, and had expected to always be alone.

Downstairs, he switched on some random lights and edged past the paintings and antiques, his eyes caught by the Japanese prints – an angry-looking alpha warrior, a woman with a swaddled baby, and a demonic snarling face, craggy and deformed, set within the stylistic confines of a mountain with trees and shrubs like one of those optical illusion pictures. The house, despite its functional layout and comfortably modern furnishings, looked and felt like a museum in the semi-dark. Anecdotal evidence he had missed during the whirlwind weekend pressed upon him; gorgeous reproductions of detailed botanical studies of flowers or herbs in Arabic; an original painting, Art Deco in affection; a Venetian mirror above an antique chest of drawers; and oddly enough, a pelican's beak, mounted high over the doorway of the kitchen's corridor entrance.

It took Will a moment to realize it *wasn't* a beak but rather one of those masks worn by doctors during the Black Plague. Morbid, but he found himself grudgingly snickering at the underlying message; *no one messes with the doctor's kitchen, or else*.

Bemused, he switched on the lights and helped himself to some tap water, not bothering to get out a glass.

“Will? Are you alright?”

Will backpedaled on instinct away from the intruder and slammed into the pantry doors, his heart leaping in his chest.

Hannibal held both hands up in a universal gesture of surrender, which didn’t take away from how much like *stalking* this felt – and stepped slowly into the light of the kitchen. Exhaling noisily, Will closed his eyes, dizzy as the fear, which he’d just about forgotten in his wander through the corridors, galloped once more in his bloodstream. His initial impression of the alpha came back to him; that this was someone *dangerous*.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” the alpha sounded genuinely apologetic.

It’s me, not you.

Will rubbed his face, trying to still his shaken nerves. “It’s okay, you surprised me. I’m just getting a drink.”

Without comment, the alpha went to a nearby drawer and opened it to take out a glass, filling it with water from the jug on the counter – which Will hadn’t even noticed. He took the cup of water with muttered thanks, and tried to ignore that Hannibal was practically hovering, a low hum of possessiveness disturbing the air around them.

“I tried not to wake you,” he muttered after finishing half the glass. “Thought I’d managed it too.”

“I’m a light sleeper – also, there’s a silent alarm that turns on my bedside light when motion is detected on the first floor between the hours of midnight and 6AM.” Seeing the frown on his face, Hannibal explained, “A safety precaution, in case the children wander in the middle of the night.”

Of course, Will leaned back against the counter and closed his eyes - *no detail too small*. “Yeah, well, sorry. I know you have an early morning.”

There was no reply, only the sound of Hannibal puttering around the kitchen.

“This won’t be the first time I’ve had to operate with less sleep than expected – and I assure you, listening to tales of my clients’ misspent youths will be far less taxing than twelve-hours on my feet in the operating theater.”

Will cracked a smile at the alpha’s description of his job. “Should you be sharing that with me?”

Hannibal’s smirk was a mere flicker and gone in a breath, “Now, I believe that some chamomile tea would help – most calming to the nerves.”

Will cleared his throat, uneasy with all the fuss being made. “It’s okay, I’m fine.”

In typical alpha fashion, the tea was seeping anyway a minute later and they retired to the study, which Will had seen little of except in passing as neither the children nor the dogs were

allowed in there.

There's a handsome fireplace, which Hannibal stoked into a merry blaze with practiced ease, and endless rows of books, as well as odd bits and ends – like the prominently placed traditional Japanese suit of armor. Unlike the rest of the house, the place was entirely archaic with period wallpaper and beautifully-tiled mosaic floors in dark smouldering shades of black, red and rust; soundproofed too, for Hannibal and presumably Will to do work at home in peace. There were two armchairs placed facing one another in front of the grated fireplace; two desks stood facing each other; two armoires sat, similar but different, in the two corners of the far wall, flanking each work space. If he needed more evidence of their *partnership,* the state of Hannibal's feelings about him*,* it's here in this study.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Will bristled and felt a sharp rejoinder come to his lips (*none of your fucking business*) – but a moment later, he wilted at the blankness on the alpha's face, the hidden worry. He nodded tiredly, because there was really no point hiding it – this man probably knew all his secrets.

"Yes..."

Hannibal poured him some tea. "Did you experience them before?"

"Do you mean before *everything* or do you mean before I left the hospital?"

"The hospital," the alpha poured his own cup of tea, and sniffed delicately.

Of course, because he had probably been dealing with this for years and knew how long it had been going on for. Will ran a hand through his hair – was this a ritual of theirs? Chamomile tea in the study during the wee hours of the night?

"No," he admitted, blowing on the tea and taking a sip. It was sweeter than expected and not at all as odd-tasting as he remembered chamomile tea to be. "No, it's – it's new."

Will held his breath, waiting for the disappointment, the knee-jerk reaction of previous prospective suitors at his 'mental instability' – and braced himself to argue against being sent back to the hospital like something broken. Hannibal only nodded slowly, pensive.

"Does this reappearance of disturbing dreams concern you?"

What?

"Doesn't it concern *you*?"

Hannibal faced him, features shadowed by the light of the fire, "Only as a possible symptom of infection, and the impact it might have on your quality of life."

Only because I want you to be well.

Will swallowed at the reference to his stint of insanity, and looked down at the alpha's slippers, ugly sheep-fur things that the children had bought for the man last Christmas. It

made him want to smile, even as his chest rattled in pain. Silence settled between them as Hannibal took another sip of tea, and then another, until Will relaxed, surprised that the man wasn't pushing him to speak.

No psychoanalysis happened, I assure you.

"Thanks, for tea," he finally said, "It's good."

"You're welcome," Hannibal stood.

There's a moment when it seemed like the man was about to lean down and kiss him, or perhaps stroke a hand along the crown of Will's head, but then the alpha just smiled tiredly and stepped past him, presumably to return to bed.

Will stared at the suit of antiquated Japanese armor and reminded himself that this was his compromise for being sprung from the hospital with half his marbles. The absolute joy of the past week spent in the company of his children and the dogs was more than worth it though, for this hour of torture; he sat in the same armchair he'd used last time he was in the study and prepared to *endure*.

All three doctors shook hands with each other and then sat down on the chairs which had appeared out of storage (dinner party extras, apparently) to regard him with varying expressions. To his relief, Hannibal sat beside him in his own armchair, just out of reach but close enough that it gave an appearance of the alpha also being under scrutiny. Will appreciated the show of solidarity, even if it didn't detract from the distastefulness of the entire event.

There was to be dinner later too, a entire five-course show courtesy of Hannibal's culinary prowess – blatant bribery, of course. If he were honest, Will despaired of this whole evening and wished he were walking the dogs instead, or spending it with Micah and the toddler. Even another awkward moment of flirtation or reminder of his past intimacy with Hannibal was preferable. His sole consolation was that Elizabeta was at a friend's house, Tomas was going to be late out at the movies with some friends, and the other two were occupied by Irene upstairs, so there were to be no witnesses.

It's supposed to be informal, just *conversation*, but Will felt distinctively on trial as he sat there, fingers tapping against the armrest.

"Well, we meet again, Will," Doctor Vaughn greeted, his voice mellow with age, "It's very good to see you looking so well."

"Thank you," Will said shortly, "Hospitals don't suit me."

There’s an awkward moment but it’s smoothed over by Hannibal who began to recount the events of the past week, noting that Will proved he knew all the kitchen appliances and even recognized some of the artworks, as well as which era the different antiques were from. He’d feel tricked by the fact that the alpha had been observing him so closely, if he didn’t pick up on how reassured Hannibal had been by these observations, and that it meant he didn't have to speak very much during this interview. There were phrases flung around like global-transient and episodic/sematic memory, and there's a very passionate discussion on how his case could be defined: who had ever heard of the brain compensating for damaged short-term memory abilities by destroying declarative memory; was this considered psychogenic amnesia – oh sorry, dissociative amnesia, that’s the term nowadays; yes, the terminology was problematic.

And it went on, and on, and on.

Will nodded agreeably whenever he was called up but mostly let Hannibal do the talking, and was caught between consternation and admiration when Doctor Vaughn - a beta who clearly believed in equality between the dynamics - persisted in asking for Will’s opinion.

Beside him, the younger Doctor Lynch, pale blond and grey-eyed with angular features, shifted in impatience and glanced several times in annoyance at his mentor. Will disliked him; the man’s respect for Vaughn receded by the day as he grew more and more full of himself; an alpha born of beta parents and thus, with a chip on his shoulder. Some beta-born alphas managed to inherit their parents easy natures or adopt their liberal views, and then there were beta-born alphas like Lynch. The doctor was much younger than Vaughn, of similar age to Alana and clearly admired Hannibal, whom he considered a venerable alpha, someone to emulate for the future. His interest in Will edged outside the boundaries of a doctor-patient relationship at times, but he tried to keep it professional; if he could get away with it though, he’d poke Will like the way a child would tear off the wings on a captured fly.

“At this stage, any organic damage has healed as much as it can,” the elderly neuropsychologist said, and then more to Alana, “It’s fascinating of course, that the mind would compensate for the damage by sacrificing such a specific time period, not differentiating between the memories being semantic or episodic – it’s completely unique and can I just say, pretty thrilling stuff.”

Will took a deep breath and smiled bitterly. Yes. *So thrilling*.

Alana looked at him, face-strained, almost as though she would like to apologize but Vaughn beat her to it.

“Of course, it must seem very unfair to you, that you've got to lose your memories to regain your ability to make new ones.”

Will stared at Alana’s boots, the same pair as what she wore at their first meeting.

“Could I ever get the memories back?”

“There are options for treatment," Lynch said, almost rubbing his hands together in glee at Will's opening for him to assert himself, "you could attempt inducing with drugs, mix it with

guided hypnosis or even shock therapy to increase your chances."

Alana shot the man a disapproving look, "All of which is experimental, with highly inconsistent results."

Lynch nodded at her, a deceptively light smile on his face. "Yes, that is true. They are nevertheless options which are open to you."

The man won't push the issue out of deference to Hannibal, who exuded alpha with every tilt of his head, and the keen awareness that his conduct needed to be above reproach before his peers. He was attracted to Will on some level, as the omega was rather attractive and smelt *divine* after four children, though mostly because Will was the mate of a powerful alpha and he just *wanted*; pity about the personality though – it was maddening to Lynch, why such an alpha doted upon this intractable, sharp-tongued...

"I would prefer to not take any risks," Hannibal said suddenly, breaking Will out of his trance staring at Lynch's shoes.

"I agree," Doctor Vaughn nodded, "the human mind is complex and delicate."

"And resilient," Lynch added, still trying to get his hoped-for experiment back on the table, "as proven by Mister Graham-Lecter's unique case."

Will startled at hearing himself referred by his mated name.

"Allow me to rephrase: our medical knowledge of the mind and all its complexities is limited – if we are honest, medical comprehension of the physical and biochemical aspects involved in memory processing is practically medieval," Hannibal leaned forward, hands clasped with elbows on knees, looking the consummate professional though Will knew that was not true; he couldn't stand the idea of more damage to Will, even in the name of curing him. It was rather stirring, more than any other gesture made by the alpha. "In short, we don't know - and our fumbling attempts to lead the mind in the direction we would like is pure folly, more likely to do harm than good."

Doctor Vaughn nodded, his heart already moved – as someone who had been married for almost fifty years and still loved his wife, he felt for Doctor Lecter and understood the alpha's caution as if it were his own.

"Doctor Bloom?" Hannibal looked to his past protégé, completely bypassing Lynch, whose disinterest in the whole proceeding grew by the second now that his suggestion had been shot down.

She took a deep breath, "I think that passive memory retrieval techniques in the form of cognitive interviews or guided meditation could be options. The gains might be negligible but there are little to no risks involved."

Hannibal nodded as if that were the foregone conclusion.

“And what about you, Will?” Doctor Vaughn asked kindly, ever mindful of including the quiet omegas; he might be a beta but he had an omega daughter whom he loved dearly, she was his darling little girl forever even if she was long-married off with her own adult children. “Does that sound like something you’re willing to try?”

He wanted to remember, of course he did – it wasn’t enough, listening to stories and looking through photos. But the idea of making himself vulnerable to anyone... Will looked from Alana’s knees to Doctor Vaughn’s briefcase, toppled over after it had slid down from its lean against the back leg of the chair.

Beside him, Hannibal’s fingers twitched and Will responded, reaching out to take the alpha’s hand.

The man’s shoulders relaxed.

Both Doctor Vaughn and Alana visibly soften at the gesture (*good, let no one suggest he go back to hospital*) and Lynch watched it with hidden longing – because what he wouldn’t give to have that too, his own omega, and it would almost be sad if he wasn’t *such a prick*.

“I’d like to remember.”

Doctor Vaughn shook his head with a dry chuckle, “Will, you talk as if you remember nothing at all – don't you see the amazing progress you've made?”

No, Will didn’t see because this was over *thirteen years of his life* here – meeting his mate, getting into the FBI, the birth of his children, their first words, their first steps, he couldn’t just give up. But the old doctor only meant well by his words and so he just looked away.

Sighing in a manner that probably wasn’t very professional, the neuropsychologist sat back in his chair and crossed his legs, stroking his chin absently. “Time will tell if the last decade or so comes back to you, but I've got my hopes on your mind sorting itself out – it’s already done what medical science can't do and can't hope to explain.”

“The important thing now is to improve your quality of life,” Alana added with a warm but stern look, “You've got to get back to the world.”

“Yes,” Doctor Vaughn nodded, “The memories will come – or they won’t.”

“But obsessing over the issue won’t bring them back.” The female beta tried to catch his eye, “You have the ability to make new memories after an impairment to your ability to, Will, which is huge – it wouldn’t be far-fetched to call it a miracle.”

Don’t waste it.

Will met her hopeful smile with a small smile of his own, because yes, she was right – he had a life to live, four perfect beautiful children to bring up, a mate to relearn, three dogs, and a career as a lecturer at the FBI waiting for him – but that didn’t stop him from being bothered by the gap in his mind. It rubbed at him like a pebble in his shoe, a constant gnawing.

“And on that note,” Hannibal stood with a smile for each of their guests, dispelling the solemn atmosphere with enviable ease, “I believe it’s time for dinner – who’s hungry?”

“Professor Graham,” the security guard, a Hispanic beta with a thick-bushy moustache beamed at him warmly, “Fancy seeing you here – and you brought the little ones too. Hey there, buddy, how’re you doing today?”

Micah greeted the man crouching down to look at him with a cautious wave and took one step back, hand reaching automatically for Will’s leg. Securely sat in the crook of Will’s left arm, Hannibal Junior looked left, twisted right around and then went back to looking left, his small torso spinning almost 270 degrees in his burning curiosity at this strange new environment. Will smiled tightly at the friendly security guard, disconcerted as always when he was recognized – at the park, at the shops, at the school gates when he tagged along with Irene – because he always felt the urge to explain why he wasn’t acting like himself, even though it was kind of an impossible task.

He placed the backpack holding the essentials onto the conveyor belt and reached down to place a comforting hand on the little blond head. His son looked up at him immediately, ever mindful of where Daddy was and what Daddy was doing, unconsciously mimicking his reactions.

“Micah’s a little shy today.”

“That’s okay,” the man said, still smiling but backing off now with his hands out in surrender. “It’s cool, buddy, you want to walk through the door here so your daddy can come in?”

Will nodded his permission and pulled out his phone, keys and wallet for the tray held out to him. The little boy smiled a little, reassured and dashed through the security scanner like they were the finishing arches at a marathon. Will followed a few steps behind and retrieved his things from the guards. Despite the fact he was in jeans and obviously touting around two young children, most of the trainees passing through the Forensic Science Research building at Quantico paid him little notice. It’s probably a bit premature, coming here for a visit, but Will was curious about his work as a lecturer and his monographs hadn’t been very revealing, all dating back to his days in forensics.

Hannibal had been supportive of the idea, and had made sure to make arrangements. So, Will had planned to take a look around – because this was the FBI Academy and he was human – pick up his work laptop, maybe his old course outlines, and then a taxi was to pick him up as Hannibal was expecting him for lunch. Of course, things hadn’t exactly worked out as planned when Hannibal Junior threw a huge tantrum because he refused to let go of Will so he could get into the taxi.

It had been *embarrassing*, but the driver had laughed uproariously as he had seven grandchildren and knew how it was. Will tipped him twenty dollars (it wasn't like Hannibal couldn't afford it – he was prepared to pay for a taxi ride to Quantico so Will could satisfy his curiosity) and let the man go off to his next fare. Marie had offered to drive him over, so the toddler could tag along – but *then* Micah started crying because *hey*, he wanted to go with Daddy as well, and it *wasn't fair*. Thus, what had started as a solo visit had become a bit of a production and Marie had ended up driving all of them across state lines to Quantico – and was hopefully sitting down having a much-needed coffee somewhere until she was hailed. Will would have loved a cup of coffee too right about now, but would settle for a shot of whiskey or two.

This was normal apparently – the entire production, the desire for caffeine or alcohol or both – according to the jovial text reply he'd gotten from the alpha when he'd let Hannibal know what was going on.

"Will?"

Freezing in front of the elevator, Will turned to face the woman staring at him incredulously. She was of Asian descent, an athletic-looking alpha female with long-hair and a strong jaw line. Instead of the trainee polo though, she was in a purple top with a padded vest jacket and looked so shocked her slender eyes were probably doubled in size. She closed the distance between them at a half-jog and grinned at him, looking more like a mischievous college girl than a federal agent. Alpha mother and beta father, he breathed, picking the details off her easily – firstborn followed quickly by more children, the pride of her parents, an unconventional family, uninterested in settling down, played a string instrument as a child, confident, self-aware.

"*Will Graham*, you are the last man on Earth I was expecting to meet today."

Teacher? No, she was wearing distinctively outdoorsy clothing; and so far, anyone who wasn't in an uniform seemed to lean more into the business casual category.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd left the hospital? I would have come over and visited," she crouched down a little and smirked at Micah, "Hey kid, high-five?"

Micah slammed his hand into the offered palm and giggled happily, obviously acquainted with her if not as comfortable as he was with Marie or Irene.

"So what's happening?" She offered a palm to Junior, who proceeded to hit it again and again, looking vastly amused the whole time.

He rather had no words for that. They obviously knew each other, and he could already tell that he would get along with her; his blunt tongue wouldn't burst her bubble, no sir, she had an alpha backbone despite her beta-breezy attitude. "Um," he said eloquently.

To his relief, she just gave him a look – not pity but embarrassment actually, on her part. "Sorry to ambush you – it's Bev, Beverly Katz. We worked together two years ago on a few cases – I'm with Forensics, got railroaded into doing a little Q and A session for a few classes

so they have a better idea of our system; you know, like, what works best as bribery – Mars bars or Starbucks triple-shot – when you want those results yesterday."

We were friends, she didn't say; *and I liked you even if you were weird,* she also didn't say; *I'm so sorry, I would have come see you if I knew you were accepting visitors and I'm so glad that you're okay – are you okay?*

Will wondered what he'd done to warrant such loyalty. And *so much guilt* – just like with Alana, the woman carried so much guilt in association with him. It affected her less than the beta, but she nevertheless considered herself an involved party. What had *actually* happened to him before the accident? Was it all just a case of bad-timing crossed with bad caseload plus brain infection and a dash of unexpected pregnancy for maximum emotional damage? It wasn't like he lost the baby; Hannibal Junior tried to stick his foot up and grumbled when he was barred from scaling Daddy's shoulder like gym equipment. What else had happened? Will had been too uneasy to ask Hannibal about it and hadn't yet tried to research the matter further online, not wanting to read about his own descent into madness – had it been as public as he feared?

"Coffee wins every time," he told her, "But chocolate comes a close second."

Her grin was like a mega-watt beam, "*See*, you know the score."

Will smiled weakly, warming to her. "I started off in entomology."

"I know – I've read your monographs."

He raised his eyebrows and was about to ask her more about their work together when Junior swung his hand in a wide arc, missed Katz's palm and smacked him in the face. Her sharply muffled laugh at his shock and failed attempts to admonish the toddler – who kept turning away from him in denial, because hey, she moved – and Micah's complete neutrality (he began to sing, loudly) made him sorry that he didn't remember her. He's glad to know he had a friend, and hands over his new phone to get her number.

"Um, hey, are you looking for Jack?"

Jack who? Will raised his eyebrows.

"Well maybe not Jack," she continued, expression growing pensive. "Hey, have you met the new head of the BAU?"

"No," Will smiled weakly at he looked away at a passing flock of trainees, all of them overly serious. "I haven't – I don't even know who the previous head of the BAU was."

It's the wrong thing to say, he could see it in the flinch she tried to pass off as nothing, an itchy nose or something; but then Katz took it in stride and placing a hand on the baby pack – seriously, hand it over, Graham – offered to walk him to where they were keeping his things. She led at an easy pace, taking them through the glassed walkway that connected up with the main lecture halls and associated classrooms.

His stuff were apparently all in a small archive room in the basement. It's as cramped as he'd envisioned when they finally found it and got it unlocked, and smelt vaguely of damp and mildew. Suddenly, his plans to go through his old papers were a lot less attractive; Will wavered at the doorway, uncertain if he should be going in at all when he had the two children to be concerned with. His guide pick up on his reluctance and went inside instead.

"We put everything back," Katz told him, crouching down to peek at the labels on a couple of boxes.

He frowned at the implication that they'd had to remove items from his office in the first place.

"You're after your laptop, right?" she asked over her shoulder, flipping her hair back out of the way. "I think it's...right... *Gotcha*."

There's a few seconds of fumbling and Will caught a glimpse of something laptop-shaped being torn out of a clear plastic sleeve which was hastily crumpled and discarded. He frowned – was that an evidence bag? Katz shot up and brandished the laptop before her, grinning in triumph. "When I was little, my parents always made me look for their lost keys."

"You should bottle it," Will remarked dryly, but took the laptop with an appreciative smile. It was a bit of a juggling act though, with Hannibal Junior still in his arms.

"I think so," Katz took the laptop off him again and somehow managed to stuff it into the baby bag among the wipes, juice boxes and nappies. She hefted the backpack higher on her shoulder. "Wanna check out your old classroom?"

He shrugged, because he'd had no concrete plans except for the laptop.

There's a class just wrapping up when they arrive, some unsolved case – the unsub was presumably still at large, and had been nicknamed the '*TT Strangler*.' Will cradled the toddler closer as if to shield him and felt his opinion of Katz improve as the woman bent down and covered Micah's eyes in the guise of a game. The photos on the display weren't the most graphic he'd ever seen, but they're gruesome enough; strangulation, he noted, and mutilation in the form of inner thigh flesh being removed; all the victims were charged with multiple counts of DUI but had gotten off from being sentenced to jail time one way or another; so, the guy was a vigilante serial killer, garden variety except for the surgical trophies, which was an odd detail. A moment later, the projector switched off and the lights came on.

"And that's all for today – on Friday, we'll be covering Kemper and Mullin, and having a look at the impact upon investigations when you have several unrelated unsubs operating in the same geographical location." The lecturer leaned a hip on his desk, "Please do your assigned readings – I will be asking questions and taking names."

There was a muted chuckle from the trainees as they begin to close notebooks and laptops, shuffling onto the next class. They all look at Will as they pass, curious, but none of them pay any real attention to him; who was he, they were thinking, why was he here, did he know the professor – and their interest ended there, because the pop quiz coming up this afternoon was

sucking the life and joy out of them. Uncertain, Micah left their guide's side and ducked behind Will's legs. He smiled down at the four-year old, and petted his blond hair.

"Mister Papparella," Katz greeted.

The name tugged at some distant memory.

The man shuffling his papers – no laptop or digital device, Will noted – looked up and broke into a grin, "Agent Katz, come to keep an old man company?"

"You wish," she retorted, their senses of humor obviously a match. Katz nodded at the doorway where he was still loitering, "I've brought an offering – may I introduce, Will Graham."

No Graham-Lecter? He must not use his mated name professionally.

Papparella took off his wire-rimmed glasses and smiled warmly at his visitors, leaving the podium with his hand outstretched. "Now there's a name I've heard before – Robert Papparella, pleased to meet you, Mister Graham."

Suddenly it clicked for Will – Robert Papparella, one of the earliest agents to work in the Behavioral Sciences unit back when it was just getting started in the late sixties - early seventies. The man had written a couple of texts for law enforcement, as well as some general publications, true crime non-fiction, on a few high profile cases; Will had read a few.

He shook the man's hand, a little astonished that the man knew of him. "As in R. Papparella who was in the FBI team that interviewed Charles Manson?"

"Ancient history, Mister Graham," the beta man winked and then glanced between the two little boys. "Who are these handsome fellows?"

Will hid a smile as Micah introduced himself boldly with his name and age, and then looked up at his brother to introduce the toddler as well – Junior perked up at his name. Off to the side, Katz watched the tableau with a charmed expression.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," the man said, holding out his hand to the four-year old.

Micah shook it, solemn and then broke into a crooked grin, the left edge of his lips turned up as if he didn't want to smile but couldn't help himself. "What's your name, mister?"

"Rob Papparella, but you can call me Mister Pappa."

"You're not Papa," the child told him haughtily.

"No, guess not," the man gave a wry smile.

Katz snickered and taking Micah by the hand, steered him towards one of the pews, offering to find his crayons and coloring book for him in this behemoth of a bag, seriously what was in here. Will admired her expert distraction tactics and wondered how many nephews and nieces she'd had to wrangle. In his arms, Hannibal Junior tightened his hold on Will's

shoulder and watched the new stranger carefully, a suspicious little furrow creasing the skin between his eyebrows. Pressing his mouth to a temple, Will smoothed a hand over the toddler's head to let him know that it was okay, shh.

"Cute kid," the older man remarked, and turned back towards the large desk where his papers still awaited sorting. "It's nice to see you on your feet by the way – sorry if I'm acting overly familiar but I followed your case."

Will shifted his weight from his left foot to his right, not sure he was following along correctly with this conversation but unwilling to draw attention to his ignorance.

Papparella finished shuffling his papers and slid everything into a soft leather suitcase. "I've done my best to stick to your syllabus – your case study on the Chesapeake Ripper is quite a read – but I hope you don't mind if I've gone with older cases. I wasn't really expecting to find myself in a classroom at this age – and quite frankly, I'm embarrassed to say that I'm a little behind."

"That's fine," Will said, confused but very flattered that a man who had been one of the guys to bring clinical and forensic psychology into the FBI was actually deferring to him.

"You considering a comeback?" The man asked genially, acting more like an honorary uncle interested in Will's career plans than a famed ex-FBI agent. "As nice as this has been, I'm about ready to go back to fishing and sipping mojitos."

Will smiled a little at the mental image of the man in a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses, slumped in the hot heat of Miami, raising his empty glass for another round. "Is that a job offer?"

With a gleam in his eye, Rob Papparella grinned with all of the South European charm he'd managed to inherit from his Italian ancestors and tickled Hannibal Junior under the chin. The toddler reacted like something had bit him and immediately jerked back, crying *NO*. Will shushed him with pats, rocking side to side, sensing the child's unease but not entirely sure why he was being so difficult today.

"No, just a friendly inquiry – seriously, there is no rush," the man picked up his briefcase with a chuckle, "You have your hands full, and it's nice, being the popular guy on campus."

In the background, Micah told Katz that he didn't want to color anymore, because she was too slow – Katz whined that he hadn't even given her a chance to really look for the crayons, and this bag was huge – and then requested to use the facilities, in those exact words. The woman's expression at the request was a mix of bewilderment, horror and amusement – she threw him a glance because, *oh Will Graham, seriously, only your kids*. Sighing, she led Micah out of the classroom, raising her voice to let Will know that they were only going to be down the hall, back in a tick.

Rob Papparella paused at the doorway of the classroom and turned to Will, still smiling but with a more serious air to it. "I really am sorry about what happened to you, the Bureau dropped the ball on that one – but things are different now, hopefully. Sanchez is good for the

BAU I think – she's a bureaucrat, don't get me wrong, but I think that's what we need sometimes."

Will licked his lips and nodded as if he understood.

"I'm consulting with one of the BAU teams, Ed Moses' people. Could I get your insight one of these days? I know you're off on leave but he's interested in having you consult - no scenes, just checking up on the profiles and going through the evidence."

"Yeah, um," he cleared his throat, "Maybe in a few weeks."

"Of course."

In the corridor, Micah exploded out of the toilets and started running for Will, looking well pleased with himself for escaping from his temporary babysitter. Katz exited the toilets with a loud sigh and gestured expansively because, hey, that's not fair, wait for me. Micah came to a stop, giggled, and then ran back in her direction.

"The agency owes you," The man was fond as he watched the scene unfold, "I know it, the Director knows it, Sanchez knows it – you could have taken the entire agency to the doghouse but you didn't. It must have been tempting to demand some satisfaction – some would probably say the Bureau had it coming – so thanks."

Will felt more and more confused as the man shook his hand and left him with a fatherly pat on the shoulder.

"It's been good to finally meet you, Mister Graham," Papparella checked his watch, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a business lunch to make."

He nodded, still at a loss for words.

"Agent Katz, I'm heading off now – one for the road?"

He watched the man stride past the forensics investigator holding out a hand for a high-five, which was given by Katz lifting up Micah to do the giving. Will's brain spun at what seemed to be a million miles an hour – the crumpled evidence bag, the guilt, *we're all sorry, too much pressure, so sorry*, brain infection, Galinthy's sickness. The ex-FBI agent-turned-temporary-lecturer laughed and disappeared around the corner.

"Hey," Katz gave him a quizzical look, "You right there, Graham?"

"Hmm?"

"You just," she gestured at her own face, widening her stance as a matter of self-preservation as Micah started dancing around while still attached to her hands. "You got that look you know, the one you get when you've got a brain-worm and are about to tell me that it's not surgical trophies but cannibalism."

"It's nothing," Will shook his head, because no – *no*, it couldn't be true. Someone would have said something, Hannibal (*I will hide things from you if I must to protect you – trust me*) or

Alana (*I want to tell you everything but I can't – it's too ugly, please don't make me; what have I allowed to happen; I might as well have been holding the gun*) or someone. Feeling almost faint, he pried his cell phone from his back pocket and checked the time, "I should go. Hannibal's expecting us."

Katz nodded, still uncertain. "Okay, let me walk you out – but hey, just so we're clear I'm all for brain-worms. Give them to me if you get them and don't be shy about it, okay?"

Will nodded vaguely and smiled at the industrial carpet they were walking on. She's not reassured, he could tell, but she's too nice to make an issue out of it.

"What's a brain-worm?" Micah asked as he took Katz's hand. "Can you eat it?"

Beverly Katz laughed, "You could try, but I don't think they're very tasty."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments of interest in the story - I am very appreciative and humbled.
The title is the first part of a French saying 'Little by little, the bird makes its nest' - as you can guess, the rest of the saying is the title of the next chapter, yes I'm very predictable.

L’oiseau fait son nid

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is basically three scenes - all talking. Yeah. I know. But these are fairly important conversations. Please read the previous chapter and this one together.
> I make ref to a Christmas street in the story - it's somewhat based on the real event in Baltimore but I shifted it to be closer to the Lecter residence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were Christmas lights on show at a nearby street in the neighbourhood – all the houses there put on a lighting display every December – that it had become a tradition for locals to come by for the yearly exhibition. Some ten metres ahead, Eli dragged her older brother along as fast as her legs could manage it because *honestly, Tomas, we have to visit the Todd's first – they always have the best display and it’s almost dark and everyone’s going to be there and I won’t see anything*. Content to follow along with the dogs trailing behind him, Will tucked his hands more firmly into his pockets. In the corner of his eye, Nap snuffled at the base of a mailbox before lifting up his hind leg casual as you may to take a leak.

“So, how have you been? Settling in?” Alana asked.

It’s been the Twilight Zone. I somehow managed to land the type of alpha that every parent wants their omega child to bring home – well, except for my old man, because you know, he’d probably find having a psychiatrist as a son-in-law to be threatening – my eldest wants to be Dvorák or the next Pablo Casals, my daughter will probably end up as CEO of some multi-national conglomerate if she doesn’t decide to aim for ‘Leader of the Free world’ – do I need to go on? Also, my laptop was put into storage still inside an FBI evidence bag and Beverly Katz had tried to hide this from me – why was my laptop ‘evidence’?

Will shrugged.

“There are bound to be problems fitting in.”

No, actually he had the exact opposite problem – he fit in, *perfectly*, and it scared him. “Are you my therapist tonight, Doctor Bloom? Or are you asking as a friend?”

She smiled in that rueful way of hers, then looked away. “Can I be a neutral third-party with a stake in the emotional outcome?”

Will’s lips quirked. Did Hannibal teach her that?

“Did you know that there are professional cleaners that come by every Monday and Thursday? Not run of the mill cleaners either, they specialize in operating theatres and morgues; heaven forbid any salmonella in Hannibal Lecter’s kitchen or dog smell in the

lounge. There's a *plant technician*," he graced her a sardonic smile, "who comes by on Wednesday, whose sole job is to spray and *polish* all of the houseplants, and on Friday, we get a visit from the dog grooming lady."

Alana threw her head back in a delightful peel of laughter and Will allowed himself to chuckle along under his breath, because *yeah*, it was a little ridiculous.

"How are the kids?" She asked when she recovered enough to speak, flushed and a little breathless.

"They're fine," He glanced ahead at Eli and Tomas, hand-in-hand, dark-haired and fair-skinned, the bright splash of the little girl's scarlet coat and her brother's emerald scarf shining like beacons in the twilight.

"How are you, with the kids?"

Will glanced over and allowed himself to glow with fondness because no matter how much of a tangled mess his head was – all the loose puzzle pieces flung everywhere, *if only he could find the corners* – all he had to do was look at their little faces and the anxiety would receded. "Fine."

Alana's mouth quirked.

The household ran to a tight schedule on weekdays and at first, he'd felt like an outsider, chasing coat tails and a little afraid that he might always be overwhelmed by it all – dance classes, music lessons, mock spelling tests to prep for the weekly quiz, play dates, the Youth Symphony's Christmas concert rehearsals twice a week, preschool for Micah three times a week, helping Hannibal with all the behind-the-scenes sausage-stuffing and jam-making because the alpha wanted to feed his family only the best. But it only took a fortnight before Will had mastered the change table and was packing lunches with Marie in the mornings like he's been at it for years, falling into his own rhythm of doctor appointments midweek preceded or followed by lunch out with Hannibal at some ridiculously over-priced restaurant, long winding walks with Junior and the dogs whenever the weather permitted, and reading all his stockpiled criminology and forensic psychology books for the first time, again, when he had a rare moment of free time.

"And how's Hannibal?"

"He's fine," he breathed.

Because that was the truth; he really didn't know what else to say about the man.

When she gave him a pointed look, he returned it.

"We're fine too."

The alpha was an excellent father – attentive, available, encouraging – and if Will hadn't already been won over by the man's cooking, wit and well-honed sense of irony, their meandering conversations at 3AM over tea and whiskey in the study would have. There's

something so easy about being around Hannibal, because the man *literally* knew all his secrets – abandoned by his mother, ignored by his father, where he got the scar on his right middle-finger from – that he'd been the lonely misunderstood omega child surrounded by betas; that Will had kept his head down when the covetous eyes and mouths and noses started pointing in his direction; that he'd learned to be his own protector and comforter, and was very bad at relinquishing those duties to someone else, even the alpha he had chosen to honor and obey, in return for comfort and protection.

Did that oath still stand now that he couldn't remember making it?

"I see, I guess I came over for nothing then," Alana said lightly, giving Winston an absent pat on the head when the dog knocked into her thigh.

"Yes, well, I didn't invite you," he muttered, and hid a wince because the beta didn't deserve that.

Alana only raised an eyebrow, unimpressed because yes of course – unless Will had been a pod-person for thirteen years, she should be used to his special brand of honesty. That guilt of hers though, wrapped up in layers upon layers and buried in the waters, it lingered...like a stench...

"Hannibal does need a second opinion on the food."

Because Will's feedback was usually limited to either asking for salt or trying to figure out why the recipe called for pigeon or hedgehog or whatever, when it all tasted like pork to him.

"And I'm always happy to be his guinea pig at the dinner table," Alana gave him a piercing look, her mouth pursed, like she wanted to grin at him the way adults would faced with a precocious child but was trying not to patronize him. "Is there anything that isn't *fine*?"

Will took a deep breath, beating back his exasperation, because he knew that the beta wouldn't be satisfied unless he gave what she considered a proper answer.

"You know how people have this vision of how their life would be one day?"

"Sure," Alana waved when Eli turned to check up on them, "I wanted to be a ballerina when I was little."

Will's brows came together as an image of the psychiatrist in tights and a tutu came to mind.

"That's not quite what I meant but yes," he chuckled, "I didn't know if I was going to be a cop or a teacher or a vet, but I knew I wanted a family."

Except in Will's vision, he'd imagined being mated to someone who worked enough to support them but was otherwise just content to be with him, cuddle up in front of a fireplace with the forest behind them and the mountains in front of them, a solitary unremarkable life. In hindsight, it's painfully clear that the partner in this vision had been beta, and that he really hadn't known what to imagine, having never really seen an alpha-omega family except on TV or at the movies, played out by actors - most of them betas. Except for reality TV; as one

typically didn't place an omega and an alpha together to play a couple and expect things to go well - inevitably, the omega's mate would start a fight with the alpha co-star, the filming needed to be rushed because the omega lead was expecting, or the alpha's mate would grow defensive and clingy.

“Congratulations then,” Alana murmured coyly, relief or *something* like it shining in the pools of her eyes, “You made it, Mister Graham. How does it feel?”

Will tugged on the leash for Dee, steering her away from a hedge dripping in fairy lights. His mind flashed to her description of flamingo ice sculptures.

“Like Alice, down the rabbit hole.”

The psychiatrist's smile froze on her face and turned pensive.

“You’re not dreaming, Will.”

Will tilted his head and smiled tightly, reminded why he really didn’t like therapists because *– I know I’m not dreaming, Alana, I’m not crazy or delusional, and you can stop. Just* stop. *I like you but not that much.*

“I’m not used to having money.”

Oh, her faced said. Then she smiled, her mind latching onto the most obvious explanation of what he meant: poor impoverished beta household bringing up an omega, which almost always resulted in pathological obsession with financial security or independence due to long-term emotional abuse via neglect of key omega instincts in childhood and puberty. *Oh*, she melted: Will woke up in the future, all of his most ignored omega-needs catered for – the sudden relaxation of that highly-developed sympathetic nervous system must be almost unnerving after a lifetime bouncing between his omega instinct to hide, defend or flee because no alpha parent, sibling or partner had been there for him.

Good, Will hunched his shoulders a little more against the cold, *let her think that* – and whistled in warning when he saw Nap freeze in guilty indecision over whether he could get away with peeing on the foot of a blow-up Santa Claus lit-up like a lantern.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Having money?”

“Being provided for.”

“It’s nice,” he admitted after a long beat, because it was nice; he liked having food, clothes, a roof over his head, and he liked it even more after Hannibal laid out the legal framework for the trust funds set up for the children, the life insurance policies on him and Will, the paperwork to ensure Will’s access to everything. He knew poverty – and so did Hannibal, even if the alpha liked to pretend otherwise by showing off his big silver spoon – it was horrid, ugly, terrifying. Will never would have considered children if he wasn’t confident of being able to support them; so yes, having money was nice. He just didn’t like the fact that

almost everything about him now – his clothes, his shoes, even his hair – was polished by money. He could only imagine what people must see when they saw his beautiful children; their neat tidy clothes, their white shining teeth, their big bright eyes, their always-new shoes.

“Does it make you comfortable to be considered wealthy?”

Will stared at the next lighting display, and mulled over the question before settling on, “Yes... yes it does.”

“Why?”

“*Because*,” he rubbed at his face, not sure why he was even having to explain; “It’s just one more reason for someone to want to take advantage of you.”

The vultures, they were always watching.

Hannibal knew what he was talking about. There was a distinct disdain in the alpha for those whom lived off conning the affections of the lonely rich, many of whom sought guidance with Hannibal when the fall-out inevitably came to pass.

“You didn’t,” Alana smiled when he looked to her to expand on what she meant by that, “You didn’t take advantage of Hannibal, when the two of you met. It would have been easy to – attractive young omega, educated and bright, alpha with lots of money looking to settle down, no family to cry foul when you make off with his fortune.”

He made a face and held his tongue, because the beta obviously didn’t know Hannibal as well as she thought she did. There was a dark chasm in the man – he was no one’s fool.

“Are you allowed to discuss him like this?”

“He’s not my patient.”

Will didn’t know if he should smile or frown at her blithe attitude. He settled on cocking an eyebrow, seeing the edges of Hannibal’s shadow in the remark.

“Yes, but he’s your friend.”

“And you’re his mate,” Alana shot him a smirk, “Just this once, I’m going to ask for forgiveness instead of permission.”

Will quickened their pace, not waiting the kids to be too far ahead, and only bothered replying when they’re close enough to hear Eli’s chatter. “Everyone has secrets. He can keep his.”

Winston looked between Will and the children, before running up ahead to do laps around Tomas and Eli, tail wagging furiously. Nap followed his pack mate’s lead, short legs barreling him down the pavement to join in. Dee tilted her head at the odd behavior and looked up to pant happily at Will, content with the sedate pace. Will smiled down at her and rewarded her loyalty by bending over to give her a few rough strokes on the back. The Basset Hound basked in it, almost rolling right over onto her side.

“Do you have secrets?” Alana asked predictably when they got moving again.

Will smiled tightly and shook his head, “If I did, it’s all gone... I am a blank slate.”

She frowned into the distance, concerned about his continual bitterness over the amnesia. Will barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes and decided that no, he didn't want to listen to another spiel on how *lucky* he was and holding onto *gratitude*.

“Hannibal is great. Very *date-able,*" and increasingly kissable, though Will preferred not to think about that. "Never leaves the towel on the bathroom floor, never mixes the whites with the colors, and a very polite sleeper.”

It’s only after he’s said it that Will flushed, aware that he’d just inadvertently revealed to a psychiatrist that he was sharing a bed with Hannibal.

Please, for the love of Jung and Erick Fromm, do not ask if we are being intimate or if I'm having problems with being intimate...

“Your words say one thing...” she raised a slender eyebrow, “Your tone says the opposite.”

“Seriously, no, just - no," He chuckled, self-deprecating; "That’s just my automatic setting – petulant and uncooperative - and you should know that by now, Doctor Bloom, come on.”

It’s satisfying when he caught her reluctantly smiling back.

“He’s great. I just...” Will wet his lips, starting to chap after weeks of dry cold weather, “I don’t know how we *fit* together. To the kids, I’m just daft old dad, but him... I can see us as friends, we obviously get along but - I don't know, ignore me...”

There was never any discontent, *disappointment* yes but never discontent, never even *a hint* of the slightest annoyance when Will kept the alpha at a physical distance – no, Hannibal was quite willing to relieve his sexual urges in the shower. That look in the man’s eyes when Micah clambered up their bed in the mornings to wake Will, usually resulting in child-slobber all over Will’s face; the way the alpha dusted off invisible lint from Will’s shoulders whenever the house jeans and jumpers were shed for medical appointment attire, so satisfied to have *his cake* that he didn’t care about eating it... Hannibal Lecter was fully prepared for a sexless marriage – so *beta* of him – after all he’d gotten his pound of flesh from Will, some would say several, and he was a twenty-first century alpha who’d never entertain the thought of walking out on his mate. But if Will ever left him, or even thought about leaving him...

“So it’s not all fine then.”

Will shot the beta a look – because she just had to say that didn’t she.

Her smile was apologetic and cheeky all at once; it didn’t quite reach her eyes but it tried. “Come on, we should probably start heading back before Hannibal sends out the cavalry, wondering why no one’s at dinner.”

Will nodded and whistled for the dogs. Winston reacted immediately, freezing and turning in their direction; Will waved for him and the dog broke into a sprint which Tomas noticed,

prompting the twelve-year old to turn around. Will caught the boy's eye and cocked his head back the way they'd come. Eli pouted when tapped on the shoulder but walked back with Tomas to join them.

"Come on, Eli," Alana grinned, "it's time for dinner."

"But we haven't seen everything yet," she whined, practically stomping invisible booties in her discontent. "We've got to go all the way around, daddy, that's how you're supposed to see it."

Will smiled and held out a hand for her, "We'll come back, don't worry, it'll all still be here tomorrow."

The six-year old frowned but took the peace-offering, her mitten-clothed hand quickly latching onto his bare one. They started heading for home.

"Tomorrow," she declared, "Let's come again."

"I have final dress rehearsals tomorrow," Tomas said, "We can come on Saturday."

"You *always* have rehearsals, Tomas," Eli retorted, "I don't like it on Saturday – there's too many people you can't see anything."

"How about next Monday?" Will offered, thinking over the week's schedule heading into next week. "We'll bring Micah and Junior with us, and go out after for dinner at *Ravenna's*. What do you say, Tomas? Eli?"

The little girl tilted her head to beam up at him. *I love you, daddy*, she didn't say. She didn't have to.

Tomas turned back from where he'd gone ahead of them and nodded, pleased with the compromise – though it's not clear whether he was happy to be included or because it shut up his sister.

Will took a deep breath, unable to help smiling down at his daughter and almost startled when Alana widened her strides to pass them, curling an arm casually over Tomas' back. The look she threw over her shoulder at him, so pleased – *so grateful, no, more like relieved, no,* no*, wrong, something more* raw– with his display of keen parental instincts in heading off the fight before it could get started, made him feel strangely proud.

"Se que c'est pour le dîner?" Elizabeta asked carefully.

Will cast his mind back to Hannibal's fanciful descriptions of what he was going to put on tonight, a trial run in preparation for the upcoming dinner party – because they *had to have one*, even if it's going to be only for a table of sixteen and held later in January, it was tradition by now.

"We're having quail," he said, not bothering with even trying to repeat Hannibal's fanciful descriptions of artichokes, cranberry sauce and so on.

“Hmm,” she practically skipped in excitement, “I love quail. Did you catch them for papa, daddy?”

“Not this time,” he smiled down at her, and reached across to smooth a stray lock of hair back from her forehead, “Maybe next time.”

The door bell rang, interrupting the flow of conversation at the table. Will looked at Hannibal, who looked back at him; Tomas didn’t have rehearsals tonight, already upstairs doing homework – if it was him, it would be too early for him to return anyhow – and Elizabeta was with him, completing the Christmas crossword puzzle handed out by her school so she’d qualify for an extra entry in the lucky dip draw. The two younger members of their brood were present; Junior’s head lolled against Will’s shoulder, a dead-weight in his arms as the little guy always was after being well-fed in the evenings, and Micah was preoccupied, an entire kaleidoscope of coloring pencils spread across his place mat, totally focused on *only* filling inside the lines of his dinnertime masterpiece.

“I’m sure it’s just carollers,” Hannibal put down his glass of wine, “Do excuse me.”

He left the dining room, Nap at his heels.

“I saw Beverly Katz yesterday,” Alana Bloom said into the quiet, downing the last of her beer. Her head tilted back, revealing the flicker of her throat as she swallowed.

“Another Ripper murder?” He asked, spearing his dessert fork through a fresh mulberry leftover from the mixed berries and chocolate mousse he’d been charged with taste-testing for his dessert.

The woman gave him a look which he ignored; it wasn’t like he could stop making *associations*.

“I didn’t know you visited Quantico. Beverly says you guys have kept in contact.”

“You didn’t ask,” and honestly, he wasn’t sure he wanted her to know – talking about it felt a bit like fiddling with Pandora’s box. Will pressed his nose into Hannibal Junior’s soft hair and breathed, noting the coconut smell of the chemical-free soap-free baby wash, and that milky wholesomeness which all children younger than five seemed to have, irregardless of dynamic.

By the exasperated look Alana gave him, a little bemused a little disappointed, it seemed she felt obligated to talk to him about it now – because he’d tried to hide it from her. Will felt like sighing; the chat during the pre-dinner walk had been his limit for the day, and while he didn't want to, if the beta decided to push him, his only recourse would be to push back.

“Where’s papa?” Micah asked.

“I don’t know, he should be back by now,” Will craned his neck to try and see if anyone was coming back from the front atrium. In his arms, Junior huffed and made a face in his sleep.

“I’ll go,” Alana said, placing a hand on his shoulder as she passed him.

Micah went back to his coloring book, content to wait since Daddy was still here to keep him company. Will took another sip of the wine, and decided that this would be his last glass tonight. It was strange but his tolerance was never very good with wine, even though he could easily drink four fingers of whiskey over an evening and be alright.

“Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Aunty Lana’s gone too,” Micah pointed out, and then beamed.

Will smiled back, surveying the almost-empty table. It was a bit like a bad comedy.

“You’re right. Want to go see what’s keeping both of them at the door?”

Micah slid off his chair and was by his side in two seconds, always so eager. It took Will a little longer, carefully pushing out from the table and slowly rising, at all times mindful with Junior who was now drooling on a shoulder. He rocked from side to side and hummed a little when the toddler blearily opened his eyes, senses tickled (*alpha*, Will thought, and then mentally sighed, *another alpha*). Then to his relief, Hannibal Junior slumped down again, satisfied to continue his snooze upon confirming Will’s presence.

“You go on ahead,” he told the four-year old, “Daddy’s just going to tuck the baby in.”

With an eager nod, the child ran for the front doors.

Not bothering to head upstairs, Will ducked into the lounge to place Junior in the portable rocker, harness on but not tightly, and made sure to double-check the baby monitor was working. Walking down the corridor that linked up with the front door, Will frowned as he heard discordant voices, and rounded the corner to find Hannibal was bodily blocking the door, Micah leaning against his leg, while Alana was nowhere to be seen.

Will frowned at the sound of her hissing at their mysterious visitor outside – she sounded *pissed*.

“Is everything okay?”

The alpha turned, tense but managed to muster up a smile of reassurance for him. Leaning down to pick up Micah, Hannibal took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Will, it’s just an old colleague of ours from the FBI.”

“So they’re here for Alana?” He asked, incredulous.

There was being consulted through constant calls and emails, and then there was being stalked. It was twenty past nine already.

The alpha exhaled, his face hard with disapproval. “No, it’s for you.”

“Is Uncle Jack not staying?”

Hannibal gave the four-year old a fond smile, his expression softening, “No, Micah, he’s not staying.”

With that, the alpha turned on his heel and left, rounding the corner for the dining room, asking if Micah would like to show him that picture he’s been working on since dinner finished. Will took a step to follow but then turned towards the front door, picking up a line of dialogue he couldn’t ignore:

“...You’ve done enough *damage* to Will and to this family, Jack – go home, Jack, just...Go.”

When he pushed the door open wider, Will found himself looking at a tall heavy-set black man, hunched in his trench coat and hat, grim in the face of Alana Bloom’s ire.

“Hi.”

Alana spun around, “Will, it’s okay, you don’t have to speak to him.”

She didn’t tell him to get back into the house like a disobedient child but it’s a close thing. Will kept his face blank as he stared at his mysterious visitor from the hospital, the man who he had guessed to be an FBI agent; the same man Beverly Katz thought he was looking for at Quantico; a man whom gentle and esteemed Doctor Alana Bloom, regularly consulted by the FBI, had problems with; a man whom Micah knew well enough to refer to as Uncle Jack.

“Hello again.”

Again? Alana looked between them, aghast.

“Will,” Jack said, tired and sick at heart but undeterred – he was a man with personal conviction on a mission of redemption. *If I'm going through hell anyway,* his wide-stance and steely gaze said, *I think I'll keep going*. He gave Will a strained smile; they had unfinished business between them, and he’d be back. “Sorry for interrupting your evening, I’ll be going now. Goodnight.”

Alana pressed her lips till they were an angry red slash across her face, a million things she didn’t want to tell him flashing in her slick eyes. *Don’t ask, Will*, her crossed arms and blank face said, the cracks almost overflowing as her chest rattled like a pressure-cooker left to blow, *don’t ask me to explain.*

“Doctor Bloom,” The man touched the brim of his hat in respect and left.

The forensic psychologist stood in the portico of the house like a guard dog, shivering and arms crossed, her eyes fixed upon the government four-wheel drive until it disappeared around the corner.

“Alana,” he began cautiously, but she cut him off.

“I should go” she said, voice raw, and brushed past him for her bag and coat.

Will closed the booklet and rubbed at his eyes. It was nearly midnight and he just couldn’t settle down – he could barely read past the opening lines of the updated Handbook of Forensic Services that he’d found among his stuff before losing his place, his mind clicking into overdrive; the itch under his skin that had been his constant companion in the hospital was back, with a vengeance. Dropping the booklet onto the small side table and sinking back in his armchair, Will reached up and tugged on the cord to switch off the reading light, all without bothering to open his eyes. The layer of rust behind his eyelids turned to darkness.

Even without looking at him, he knew that Hannibal had put down the iPad and was patiently waiting for him to speak first.

“Who’s Jack?”

There was a breath, and in his mind’s eye, Hannibal shifted back in his chair, his gaze shifting from item to item as he sought to find the right words. Always so careful with his words, his alpha.

“You’re referring to our unexpected guest tonight – Jack Crawford.”

Will nodded.

“He was the head of the BAU division of the FBI.”

“Was?”

There was a pause, “Yes. He stepped down over a year ago, to look after his wife.”

Will raised a quizzical eyebrow. He felt Hannibal’s bemusement over the gesture, lightening the solemnity which blanketed them.

“She has cancer.”

Well, that’s depressing.

“How do we know each other?”

There was a breath, and the shift of fine cloth as Hannibal presumably crossed his legs and got into a more comfortable position, settling in. Will could almost see his hands fidgeting, the way it always did during a difficult conversation – Hannibal didn't know he fidgeted of course, or he'd stop; and since Will liked seeing the alpha behaving like a school boy, he was never going to tell him.

"Jack asked to borrow your imagination; you agreed, as eight young girls were dead, all omega, none older than seventeen, and there were fears that more victims would follow."

Plausible. His instinct for self-preservation as an omega would have been overridden by his need to preserve the next generation.

"Naturally, with your skills, you solved the case easily. When the next case came, Jack asked for you again, and you agreed to assist him, again. This went on for several months."

Officially, you were an instructor at the Academy; unofficially, you were Jack Crawford's hunting hound.

Will swallowed thickly, able to easily pick up upon the disapproval carefully banked within that smooth melodious voice. Hannibal was *incensed* – not at him, no, Will was *special.* Hannibal found it almost impossible to be anything but enthralled with Will, and he had known that it was only a matter of time before others noticed how unique Will was, but they would be too late because Hannibal had already carried this prize home. He was *the first* and he would be - Will screwed his eyes shut, slamming close the door on the tsunami of jumbled thoughts feelings and impressions that he'd somehow managed to collate on the alpha just by sharing a space.

"You became...depressed," The alpha audibly swallowed, "I was worried about you, but you were insistent that the work was important. Jack Crawford was most obstinate when I went to him with my concerns."

Jack Crawford was the one at fault; the man saw your compassion, and he held it for ransom.

The absence of sound except for the flicker of the fire prompted Will to open his eyes.

Hannibal's head was tilted back, eyes closed as the faintest glimmer of moisture clung to his eyelashes. "You began to lose time, behaved oddly, and grew secretive. Jack came to suspect that you were involved in some of the murders you were called in to consult upon – specifically, the serial killer referred to as the Bureau Butcher."

The notorious and elusive killer who targeted FBI trainees and typically preferred his victims to be taken from the graduating class, culling the flock so to speak.

"You didn't fit the profile exactly but then," the alpha cocked his head to the side, a thin smile stretching his lips, "You wrote the profile."

Will felt his mouth grow dry, till it felt like he was bleeding through the membranes that lined his inner cheeks. According to his catch-up reading, the Bureau Butcher had been active in the DMV tri-state since 2007, always killing at the end of the six month training period when

a new class was about to graduate or in the new year when HR decided on placements, spreading out the graduates across the organization according to needs or skills. Some semesters saw only one dead; other semesters, as many as six would be culled.

When the first murder had occurred, it had been touted as an embarrassment – how could the FBI screening have missed that one of their own trainees was a killer? That had been the alleged motive: professional competition turned murderous. By the tenth body drop, the FBI stop looking at the students and start looking at the teachers, the cleaners, the IT people, even some of the lab techs, desperate for answers.

There was an ongoing indecision within the FBI according to Katz's emails regarding who was actually the more terrifying psychopath – the Chesapeake Ripper or the Bureau Butcher. Both were sadistic, meticulous, had a preference for surgical trophies and an almost superhuman ability to stage a crime scene just how they liked it; one liked to prey upon the very people trained to catch him, uncaring that he went after the highest-risk targets of all; the other had no discernible pattern, method or victim-type other than a propensity for the theatrical, and seemingly able to slip in and out of homes, offices and public spaces without notice.

Will wasn't sure he wanted to hear anymore; he knew where this story was going. He covered his face with both hands and squeezed his eyes shut, because *no*. NO.

The alpha stood and disappeared to the back corner of the study. There were the sounds of drinks being poured. When he returned, it was with two tumblers filled with at least three fingers of whiskey each and the half-empty bottle. Will took one gratefully, fingers clammy and stiff. The liquor was smooth across his tongue and slid easily down his throat.

Will held out his glass for a top-up.

"What happened?" He whispered once he'd had at least four fingers of the potent stuff, buoyed by the heat hitting his stomach.

Hannibal held his own tumbler up to rest upon his upper lip and took a delicate sniff before drinking. There's a soft moist sound when his mouth finally released the rim of the crystal glass, like a delicate exclamation or a sigh.

"There was evidence implicating you. You were arrested."

Will took a shuddering breath. In his mind's eye, he saw anonymous men and women in FBI jackets, coming in and out all day, tracking dirt through Hannibal's beautiful kitchen, stomping over the mosaic tiles of the study, taking away his things, taking away the children's things, riffling though Hannibal's silk tie collection, pulling at all those clothes that had been bought for Will and throwing them into evidence bags, like old newspapers, like they weren't pieces of someone's life.

"You were frightened, as you had no memories to back up your claims of innocence. That was when they discovered the encephalitis," Hannibal's eyes drifted across the study, unable to settle on any one thing.

“There was naturally an immediate backlash in the media – the Butcher as an Academy instructor? You can imagine the headlines.” The alpha took another sip, and then tilted the glass to the side, studying the liquor's glow in the flickering light of the fireplace.

“Only the quick action of our lawyers kept your name out of the press. The Inspector General’s Office agreed upon a closed hearing, in consideration for all involved – no media coverage was permitted.”

Will almost chuckled because oh, *the irony*: he had just complained last week to Hannibal about how the media circus that inevitably surrounded the apprehension of violent and dangerous criminals damaged the duties of law enforcement; that what drove the FBI now to catch criminals was not service to the Law or public safety, but to protect the organization’s image and satisfy the bloodthirst, to save *face*. How much credibility must they have lost in this? A killer in their midst, forming the very minds that were supposed to catch him.

Hannibal held his tumbler between lose fingers, face turned down, lost to shadows. “You were charged with several counts of first degree murder, among others.”

Will took a deep breath and let his eyes flutter close, almost able to feel the cuffs encircling his wrists and ankles, the beady eyes staring into the back of his skull.

“There was a mistrial, but not before it came to light that you might have been framed.”

Will took a swig of the whiskey, not caring that he probably just swallowed thirty-dollars worth of alcohol in one mouthful.

“Well,” he choked out, “that’s a relief.”

“Several FBI trainees were murdered while you were incarcerated, as well as people you came into contact with during your work for Jack Crawford. One of the victims was a neurologist, Doctor Sutcliffe, whom upon being investigated was discovered to have conspired to hide your encephalitis from you.”

Hannibal uncrossed his legs and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it – Will felt the urge to smooth the strands back to their usual parting, “It was suggested that perhaps the killer had somehow found out about your condition, and used it to manipulate you into appearing to be responsible for his crimes. Your case began to unravel.”

That must have *really* pissed someone off.

Even in a closed hearing, there were records – and those records made a mockery of the FBI because Will knew, he *just knew* that they would have tried to talk him into a guilty plea so they could sweep him under the rug, and then to be shown that he was just a *patsy*? And that they had actually taken the bait, *hook line and sinker*?

Oh, oh, the Butcher must have been *dying* of mirth.

“There was an FBI inquiry to review your case; however, you suffered a seizure as we awaited their conclusions,” Hannibal stared at the tiles between them, drink forgotten in his

hand, “It was discovered that due to the encephalitis, you were also suffering an advanced case of Galinthy’s sickness. By the time the FBI caught up with the doctor who should have known and informed them of your condition, he was already dead.”

Will swallowed down the bile trying to crawl out of his chest and filled in the blanks on his own.

I really am sorry about what happened to you, the Bureau dropped the ball on that one – but things are different now, hopefully.

Hannibal drained his tumbler and placed the empty glass decisively on the side table.

“You were declared to be physically incapable of committing your accused crimes, all allegations were dropped and you were moved to the Mercy Hospital to recover from the ordeal.”

Will nodded weakly and sucked down the urge to break into delirious tears of relief. He had known that he must have been found innocent, because he was here, still technically employed by the FBI Academy and drinking whiskey with Hannibal – but still...

He wondered how many heads rolled at the FBI.

Even without names, the details would have eventually come to light – someone would have let something loose, a cleaner, a secretary, one of the security guards – and the journalists would have gone to town with the banners: the FBI thought one of their own was a serial killer and arrested him, despite the fact that he didn’t match the profile of the Butcher – only their trainees continued to show up dead, butchered and displayed, because the Butcher would never be a pregnant omega suffering a brain infection. It was ludicrous. What were the FBI thinking?

It was the perfect bait-and-switch, Will realized: mess with the instructor who might catch him, mess with Jack Crawford the head of the BAU, and make the masses turn their backs on the Bureau for the blatant abuse and injustice inflicted upon an innocent omega father of three young children.

Somewhere, the real Butcher was sipping champagne and congratulating himself on a job well-done.

It was *brilliant*.

Whoever he was, the Butcher was a fucking virtuoso of manipulation. Will would clap if he hadn’t been one of the people chewed up and spat out by the ploy.

Hannibal stood heavily, limbs obviously laden down by the alcohol and held out his hands, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes more pronounced in his exhaustion. Will rubbed his face, still shaking, and let himself be pulled up into an embrace.

He closed his eyes as a hand, warm and a little rough, gently cupped the back of his head almost as if protecting him. It reminded him of the way he held Junior sometimes, so careful

with his precious burden.

“Jack believes that you know who the Butcher is and wants your help to catch him.”

Will took a trembling breath and said nothing.

Hannibal’s hand stroked down over the nape of his neck, smoothing down errant curls, again and again. Will’s hands jerked as they made contact with the hem of the alpha’s jumper, the tips of his fingers almost feeling stripped raw as they glided over the ribbing patterns in the wool and met in the middle of Hannibal’s back.

They were hugging, he realized, he was hugging his mate. How odd.

“You mustn’t let yourself be pressured,” Hannibal continued, tucking his head against Will's neck before pulling back to be face-to-face with his mate. “Jack Crawford is a man who is uninterested in anyone’s opinion but his own. He is obsessed, with both the Butcher and the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Will stared at the golden writing along the spines of the French books, unable to face the intensity of the alpha’s regard.

“Promise me that you won’t entertain his delusions,” Hannibal murmured, a knuckle sliding against Will's cheek, and then he tightened the embrace, sighing into the shell of the younger man's right ear, “You’ve been through so much in the last two years, and then there was the accident; all I want is for you to be better. I don't care for the lives you save, Will, I care about your life.”

Will nodded, because yes, yes, of course, and let his chin hook onto the curve of Hannibal’s neck, let himself breathe deeply, let himself squeeze his arms around the warm torso he was pressed up against. The tip of the alpha’s nose brushed over the sensitive skin at the base of his neck, scenting him back.

Several FBI trainees were murdered while you were incarcerated, as well as people you came into contact with during your work for Jack Crawford...

It was suggested that perhaps the killer had somehow found out about your condition, and used it to manipulate you into appearing to be responsible for his crimes...

You were declared to be physically incapable of committing your accused crimes, all allegations were dropped...

Will’s eyelashes fluttered as something worm-like twitched in the recesses of his mind.

The alpha pulled back finally after a minute or two. Will stood there, swaying, feeling almost naked.

"You use the bathroom upstairs - I shall tidy up here and then join you."

"Okay," he agreed, and before his courage deserted him, pressed a dry closed-mouth kiss to Hannibal's jaw. "See you upstairs."

Then, feeling as though his entire face was on fire, Will left for bed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it got a bit angsty there at the end but hey, Will has peeked inside Pandora's box! PLOT has officially begun!
So in this AU the general premise of S1's end and S2's beginning did happen - Will was locked up, and then freed - but here, he was let go with Hannibal Junior ready to pop soon and shortly after, got into a car accident. Now, we all know that Hannibal can be a big fat liar - but he does consider Will to be 'his people' so to speak so... this story he's told Will, did he tell the complete truth or was he play-acting? Or is the truth somewhere in between
Opinions? Also, seriously, my creativity was at a loss coming up with serial killer monikers - if anyone has suggestions, I'm wide open here

L’appel du vide

Chapter Notes

Enjoy. Bit of fluff and a bit of plot. The top of the slippery slide :)
Reminder - I have no beta, thus I'm sure I've made mistakes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The park seemed like a strange and foreign land this morning, though Will knew it was exactly the same as two days ago. Beside him, Micah skipped every three steps, trying to keep up with Nap whom he had on the leash. Winston, well-behaved as always, followed a few steps behind, while Dee stuck to trotting along the stroller as she usually did on these walks. Stopping at a free bench and putting the brakes on, he unleashed an energetic Hannibal Junior, feeling hunted even as he beamed down at the child and adjusted his small red scarf. There weren't many people around yet – presumably because unlike him, they didn’t have a Marie in their life and so still had to finish cleaning up the remains of breakfast or were just completing the school run – but he nodded polite greetings to a few familiar faces.

All smile back, more at his children than at him – yes, their eyes brush over him, because they didn’t need to know more than what was in front of them: well-dressed omega with two young children. And that’s all he was to them – a stay-at-home dad.

Not an FBI Academy lecturer.

Not the man accused of being the Butcher.

Not an amnesiac.

Will followed along as the toddler half-ran half-waddled after his brother, desperately curious about the play gym equipment, and somehow managed to hoist himself half-way onto a rocking horse before Will plucked him up and away from toppling over onto his head. Even as he laughed at the pouting face, the hairs on his neck twinged, as though someone were spying upon him.

No one was, of course. It was just the conversation with Hannibal, flopping around inside of him like something cold and slimy, stirring up the murk.

Alana had predictably sent him a concerned text message, and a feeble apology for leaving so abruptly. Will had ignored her, and the texts she sent again today, because he still liked her despite the fact she’d probably been one of the people who’d cast a vote in the decision to hide the truth – he hadn’t forgotten that she’d been the one to come clean about the existence of his children, and so he forgave her on principle. He just didn’t want to see her for a week or two – or three.

You must talk to someone, Hannibal had said.

Will agreed – he just needed to find someone who was able to be *brutally* honest with him.

He needed someone who didn't want to protect him or coddle him or was so mired in their personal guilt that they couldn't be straight with him because they weren't even being honest to themselves anymore.

He needed a stranger.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been really showing up for sessions with the therapist that Doctor Vaughn had recommended. The beta, a Doctor Parrish, was okay, he supposed, but clearly struggled with his overwhelming interest in Will's peculiar skill set.

At the corner of his eyes, Micah laughed and dove to the left and then the right, trying to confuse Nap in their free-form game of tag. Junior circled the equipment like a crab looking for a foothold, so excited even though he couldn't really play like the other children yet. Will smiled, comforted by their simply joy – to them, the world was still friendly, still fun, still safe.

Crouching down, Will picked his youngest up and walked to the swings, settling in with the toddler in his lap. Looking up at him with his big baby blues, Hannibal Junior beamed like he'd just been given the best gift ever and grabbed for the metal chains. Will smiled back and pushed carefully off the ground, absorbing every crease, every shift in his son's expression as the toddler giggled.

"Well, well," someone came to a stop before him, hand on her hips, "If it isn't Professor Graham come to grace us with his charming presence once more."

Jerking upright and onto his feet, arms clutching a startled Junior, Will stared at the beta woman in front of him. She had red hair pulled up high into a ponytail, anywhere above forty and under fifty-five in that indefinable way women possessed, and was accompanied by a sweet-faced young omega woman who was pregnant enough that Will couldn't help zeroing in on her stomach, as well as a sallow-faced beta man with a German Sheppard. They all looked at him, friendly and expectant.

"Missed you around here," the beta woman continued, her broad accent – an odd blend of Georgian and New York City – piquing his interest. She had been born in the south and moved to the Big Apple, probably for school then had stayed there, likely for her career – something involving skilled hands – and didn't consider settling down until recently when she had a health scare. "I heard you were back but I guess we must have just kept missing each other."

A young alpha boy at her side was quickly shedding his outer coat. "Hi Mister Graham," the boy said in a rush, practically throwing his coat aside to the woman who had to lunge to catch it before he was running away, leaping onto the play gym with all the energy of a wild cat.

"Be careful, Aaron!" She yelled after him, fond and irate all at once. And then grinned like they're sharing an old joke, "Alphas, I swear – *one day*. Heard about your accident, Will, it's

good to see you."

"Yes," he replied stiffly, because he hated this every time it happened – the awkward reintroductions, the stiff spiel about how they knew each other.

"I'm Kathy – Kathy Prescott," the woman grinned, her blithe attitude reminding him of Beverly yet toned down with a laziness that seemed innate in her carriage and gestures. "This is Sarah O'Connell, and that guy over there is Nathan Rollins-Grant."

Will took the offered hand and made an effort to give short nods to the others, warmed by her easy manners – her son being born an alpha lead to her and her husband choosing to settle here instead of the inner-city apartment they'd initially considered, hoping to provide him with appropriate role models and the social connections that he'll need later to secure a mate. She liked him – he reminded her of a relative, an omega born into their solidly beta extended family – and like Beverly Katz, her bubble could easily withstand his casual brand of cruelty.

In the background, Sarah wandered off to a nearby bench, having been waved at by someone else she knew, while the beta man, Nathan, struggled to hold onto the leash of his dog that had scented something absolutely fascinating and wasn't letting go of it.

"Finally taking a break, Graham?" The man remarked, "Good to see."

Will hid his frown and gave a desultory nod, instantly taking a dislike to the beta – a hen-pecked househusband of an alpha woman, he loved his children (he disdained his wife) though the dog didn't respect him, which said a lot actually (wasn't his dog, was it – no he was just *forced to pick up the poop like always*) and going by the way he was looking at some of the younger omega and beta females, he was quite ready to do the breeding instead of being milked on his back for his seed. Should have picked your mate better, Mister Rollins-Grant, or be a decent human being and get honest with her – because as far as she was concerned, he'd sacrificed his career so she could have hers as well as that family she wanted and she honored him for it (his watch was *very* expensive; Will would know, he had one), couldn't he see that?

Kathy glanced heavenwards, "Yes well, when you're so good at what you do that the FBI literally come to your doorstep begging you for a consultation, it would be pretty hard to take a break."

He swallowed at the unintended reminder of his troubled past with the Bureau, since someone like Kathy probably had no idea about any of it. Nathan didn't get a chance to answer her, as his dog had decided that he'd figured out what he could smell and sprang after it. Grunting and puffing, the man hurried away muttering that he'd better take the mutt for a good hard walk *away* from the children.

"Good idea," Kathy drawled, and then when the man's far enough not to hear her, muttered. "You shouldn't be walking that big a dog here anyway, but no, dogs are chick magnets and you're going through a midlife crisis."

Will's eyes widened even as he glanced around, feeling almost like she'd cursed graphically or something, and felt his mouth curling without permission. The older woman caught his

smirk and returned it.

“To the bench, Professor,” she declared, stepping in closer to bop Hannibal Junior on the nose.

The toddler’s smile was slow but intrigued.

Will mirrored it, and followed the woman to the bench where he’d left the stroller, all while making sure that Micah was still on the rocking horse where he’d last seen him. Sensing the stare, the four-year old beamed at him and waved both hands but quickly gasped and grabbed for the metal head of the horse, realizing that yes, it wasn’t a good idea to let go while the horse was still moving. Will smiled widened when he noticed Nap, still on his leash and sitting primly by the boy’s side, while Dee was enjoying the attentions of a pair of little girls with their grandmothers, leg almost trembling in pleasure at all the belly stroking.

“So what happened?” Kathy asked as soon as he sat down. “Your man said it was a pretty serious accident.”

Will shrugged, and pulled his head out of the way when Junior tried to grab his nose for leverage. “Car accident. I hit my head. Things got a bit scrambled up there.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell her that he’d lost thirteen years of memories. He liked the fact that she didn’t show him any pity or tried to manage him, and he wanted it to stay that way. Winston trotted back to them and sat down by Will’s leg, prompting Junior to kick at him in curiosity, wriggling and grumbling when his father wouldn’t let him go.

“Oh,” she made a face, sympathetic – she wasn’t very close to him but she liked him, she thought of him as the steady sort (which completely amused him because if someone had told him once upon a time – Will Graham, *steady sort*) “God, that’s terrible. You right now?”

“Not quite,” he admitted.

There’s genuine admiration from her as she looked him up and down. “Well, you look *good*. I knew something was wrong though, even before you told me.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

“You’re usually a lot bitchier.”

Will opened his mouth and closed it again, because okay, he *really* liked her. Junior looked up at him, and started struggling to turn around and get up on Will’s thigh.

She flashed him a wide grin, unapologetic. “How’s your doctor?”

Realizing that she was referring to Hannibal, Will shrugged, not really sure what he could say. It was complicated.

“Poor guy,” she sighed, sitting back and crossing her outstretched legs, “He put on a good show of being okay, but he definitely missed you something rotten while you were off

recovering. The kids, they don't care – I mean they do – but they don't really know you, not like him."

Her smile was wry and a little sad as she slung an arm over the seat back, "He'll be worrying about you in the back of his mind every time you say or do something that reminds him you're different now, and trying to take care of you, cos he loves you even if he doesn't quite know if he likes the new you."

He was surprised that she was more concerned for Hannibal than for the children – that's what people usually focused on. And her word choices... "You've got someone in your family with a memory disorder," he said, and then stammered an apology when she glanced at him.

"My granddaddy," she admitted, "Alzheimer's – he's over ninety though, so... you know."

They were close; she knew the struggles of living with family who had memory issues.

Will knew logically that it must have been hard on Hannibal, but the alpha was so confident, so at ease, that it was rather easy to forget. His mind cast itself back to late Wednesday night, to the kiss – it wasn't even on the lips – and the way he'd tried not to read too much into it when Hannibal was more cheerful the next morning.

"Things okay at home? You just went all quiet," she smiled, kindly, all middle-aged and experienced in the way that he wasn't – at least, he didn't feel it. And that experience showed when suddenly, perhaps sensing his unwillingness to talk about what was happening, she changed the subject; "What did you do for Thanksgiving?"

"Um, nothing. We ah, stayed in."

They'd eaten a lavish dinner and taken turns playing the theremin that Hannibal pulled out from God knows where. Everyone had enjoyed themselves, he knew he did; Junior hadn't quite worked out what was going on, while Micah was absolutely absorbed by the entire process though he often needed his Papa or Tomas' careful guidance to keep the instrument from being too shrill. Elizabeta had tried to figure out how to play 'Mary had a little lamb' while the dogs howled from the back porch whenever she hit a certain note.

"Nothing?" She sounded horrified.

"Hannibal's not American so..." he shrugged, pleased that he actually had a legitimate reason for not celebrating the holiday. "It's not a thing at our house."

Vaguely he wondered why Hannibal never mentioned him being friends with the beta, but as they continued chatting, he came to realize that their interactions were limited to the confines of the park – somewhere he'd apparently visited frequently once he'd had Junior and was on extended sabbatical – and despite her desire for friendship, they were really more fond acquaintances.

"You should come over for coffee sometimes," she offered, once she'd reintroduced all the regulars that were present that morning, saving Will from future awkwardness. "I'm

supposed to be putting together a geek chic slash noir murder mystery type spread for the magazine next month, so you might even be able to offer some advice."

Evidently she was some kind of stylist or graphic designer.

"Maybe."

Somehow Will doubted that he could help – he didn't even bother to dress himself now, not when Hannibal took such great pleasure in picking out his clothes. It was such an alpha thing, wasn't it?

As abruptly as he had left, Kathy's son Aaron was back.

"Mom," the boy cried excitedly, "I brought you a worm – look!"

"*Delightful*, sweetie," Kathy laughed but couldn't hide her half-grimace as she was forced to either take the muddy fistful of worm and dirt or have it dropped in her lap.

Obviously following the other boy's lead, Micah came to a skittering stop by Will, frightening Winston who jerked and had to do a couple of turns before he could settle down again with a whine of discontent at almost being trod on. Nap followed faithfully at the little boy's heels, panting hard in his old age.

"For you, daddy," he said, thrusting a slightly wilted handful of six or seven flowers that were more weeds than anything else. Will took them and made a show of giving them an appreciative sniff. Hannibal Junior grabbed for them with both hands immediately, looking quite interested in figuring out how they'd taste.

"Thank you," he smiled, reaching out to ruffle the boy's hair, "They're very nice."

Micah beamed and turning on his heels, ran after Aaron who was already waiting impatiently by the swings which were finally free again.

"Well, Hannibal has certainly gotten him well-trained," Kathy remarked, bending over a grunt to return the poor half-mangled worm to its natural habitat.

"Hmm?" Will wrestled the flowers from Hannibal Junior's fist and distracted him by tickling him on the nose with the only clean-looking daisy in the bunch.

"Your boy picked you flowers, and *me*?" The beta fished a packet of wipes from her coat pocket. "I get *worms*, how is that fair?"

Will chuckled at her mock-wounded expression. In the background, the boys swung their legs to get the swings moving until inertia pitched in to help.

"Are you going to the kid's charity concert on Saturday?"

Will nodded, "Tomas is performing – cello, first chair."

Kathy gave him a narrow look. He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“What are you feeding these children, Professor?”

“Ah,” he smiled wanly, feeling odd as he admitted, “Hannibal’s responsible for food in the house, he’s into the whole organic, home-made thing,” because really, he didn’t do much at all except play with the children and some light housework – while Hannibal worked, cooked, ran errands, did all the accounting, on top of being there for him and the children – and it made him feel slightly guilty now that he’s realize it.

The beta woman grabbed at her chest, “That man of yours cooks too?”

“He’s very hands-on.”

“I *bet* he is, you have four kids...” Kathy suggestively muttered under her breath but gave him an innocent smile when he turned to look at her.

To display his displeasure at not being the center of attention for way too long, Hannibal Junior grabbed Will’s ear and started to do energetic squats, as though the thigh he was standing on was a jumping castle. The beta woman cooed, gesturing for permission to pick him up. Will loosened his hold in reply. Looking peeved, the toddler allowed himself to be passed over with the kind of haughtiness that had to be inherited from Hannibal’s side of the family; all the children – even their quiet and gentle firstborn – were capable of making that face. He quickly changed his tune though when the woman offered her hand for a high-five.

“He’s adorable,” Kathy said after a moment, grinning broadly. “He looks like you and Hannibal, don’t you think?”

Will reached across to smooth down a tuff of dark golden hair and smiled when Hannibal Junior turned to him, distracted from his little game, *always* so delighted to have Will’s attention. The feeling of being hunted eased in the face of the child’s dawning grin.

The shop was quaint, set in a heritage house on a street corner that had once been residential, and wasn’t particularly well-lit for the time of day, but he supposed that might be on purpose to highlight the Christmas lights strung up in the windows – all music notes, naturally. Will entered the string shop a step behind Tomas, the bell above the door ringing, and unwound his scarf to tuck it into a pocket. There’s muffled sounds of a solo violin from somewhere, a handsome staircase leading to the upstairs set as the backdrop for the main counter, which held a laptop rather than the expected cash register. The main display room was almost empty, only an elderly couple in hats and scarves who chatted pleasantly in low murmurs as they examined the rack of spare parts, arm-in-arm.

Tomas glanced back at him, a little uncertain. Will placed a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder, because it’s obviously the right place, and even if the man they were here to meet

wasn't in today, there was always next week.

There were framed lithographs of notable composers, a heavy bookshelf of manuscripts, several antique tall boys, as well as a bust of Beethoven on one of the side tables, and muted rugs over the floorboards and light green-grey walls, calming shades and utterly in contrast with the flashing neon lights in the shoe store they'd stopped by to get Tomas a new pair of sneakers. It didn't look like any music shop that Will had visited in the past (no guitars, no speakers, no posters of rock bands) but then he supposed that this place catered to a very specific subset of music lovers.

The double doors leading to a second display room opened all of the way, revealing a tall black beta man in a three-piece suit. "Tomas Lecter, you're right on time."

"Hi Mister Budge."

The proprietor of *Chordophone String Shop* smiled politely at the boy before turning his sharp gaze to Will. "And you must be Mister Lecter, Tomas' father. Please, this way."

Actually, I still go by Graham...

Will straightened from where he was preparing to take a closer look at a rack of necks and followed Tomas into the second and much bigger show-room. In the corner, a young beta girl with Asian features and glasses wore a look of intense concentration as she played, half-muted by the soundproofing glass partitions that boxed her in.

There was a large handsome oak dining table near the windows, re-purposed to be part of a work-space that looked a little too neat to be a real workshop; a house this old, there was probably a basement being put to work. The man carefully removed Tomas' intended cello from the stand it was on – it's almost completely restored, but the pegs were mismatched rather than the beautifully crafted set that Hannibal had picked out together with Tomas for the final product – and gestured for the boy to sit and try it out. There's a hidden excitement to Tomas as he cradled his new instrument, a reward for his hard work through the past year; Will tried not to think about the fact that this *restored* cello (it had been bought from an estate auction last year and held till it could be fixed up) was going to cost over twenty thousand dollars by the time Tomas brought it home.

Taking a deep breath and holding the cello as delicately as one could to a hefty instrument, the twelve-year old drew his bow, face blank in half-anticipation half-dread.

The low-throaty cry made Tomas' eyes crease into half-moons of satisfaction, and after a few more adjustments, he began to play. The plucky opening of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 filled the space, and Will leaned against the nearby door frame with his arms crossed, unable to help the smile that burst from him when the twelve-year old met his gaze and they shared a small private grin.

"He is very gifted, you must be very proud."

Will forced himself to straighten and face the shop owner.

The beta man smiled with perhaps more warmth than one expected in a business transaction, and offered a hand. “Tobias Budge. Charmed.”

“Yes, Will Graham-” and then a beat after, “Graham-Lecter.”

Something flickered in the man’s face but he didn’t comment on the slip.

Will shook the man’s hand and felt his adrenaline spike when the man seemed to hang on for two-seconds longer than appropriate. It could be put down to the man being so enthused with Tomas’ playing that it spilled over into his interactions with Will – or the man was harboring some very inappropriate attraction to him. That seemed unlikely considering how high the man’s collar was buttoned and the way his eyes stayed firmly upon Will’s face rather than roaming.

“Thank you – for doing this. I know you had to make a special effort to fit Tomas in.”

Luthiers were hard to come by apparently – three operated in Maryland State, and only one in Baltimore – and all of them were busy with commissions until next summer. According to Hannibal, the twelve-year old had been approached by the sole luthier in town, Mister Tobias Budge, who'd been so impressed with his performance during last year’s Fall charity concert that he was willing to take Tomas on as a client despite his already-full waiting list.

Budge smiled broadly, chin tilted up – there was something arrogant about him despite his beta status, like he was in on a joke you weren’t aware of. “It’s my great pleasure. The rare kind of musical talent that Tomas possesses needs to be supported to thrive, and I am an avid supporter of the Baltimore arts scene.”

His eyes drifted towards the beta’s face and paused at the man’s tie – standard Windsor knot, unlike Hannibal’s preference for the Plattsburgh knot – but then he froze, realizing that the man was still looking at him intently, almost studying him.

Tobias Budge smiled when he was caught. “I’m very sorry, I’ve heard from the concertmaster that if I was to meet you, I would definitely know that you were related to Tomas – it is still surprising though, how much you are alike.”

Will smiled tightly, uncomfortable despite that warm glow of pride at having someone point out how much Tomas resembled him. Something inside of him swelled with tenderness towards his firstborn.

“Excuse me a moment.”

Budge went to his front counter to ring up the purchases of the old couple, who were regulars going by the warm interactions. By the time the man came back, the little girl playing violin had stopped pretending to concentrate on her piece and was attempting to follow Tomas’ lead. The boy beamed at her, impressed and pleased to have an accomplice, and left Bach behind for something Will didn’t recognize – she took his cue and changed her tune too.

“Ah,” Tobias Budge breathed, “Isn’t it just lovely.”

It was pretty impressive.

“Do you play?”

“No,” Will didn’t think that a few bars of *Greensleeves* on the piano counted.

“Oh? Tomas is such a keen musician, I'm surprised; I would have expected to find out that parental influence was at work in the development of his passion.”

“That would be Tomas’ Pater,” he said, just barely stopping the ‘*that would be my husband’s influence’* which sat *way* too comfortably on his tongue, “He’s sits on the board for the Metropolitan Orchestra.”

The beta smiled and nodded slowly as if all were clear to him now, “I might have met him already then – I carry the best catgut strings in all of Baltimore; the Metropolitan refuses to play anything else.”

Will had the feeling that Budge would either get along famously with Hannibal due to their similar taste in tailoring and affinity for the finer arts or they’d hate each other on sight.

“Does he play?”

“Yes,” but how it was *any* of the man’s business, well... Will tried not to get defensive, reminding himself that this was just a typical conversation that a cello-maker might make with the parent of a cello-playing child.

“I heard you’ve recently recovered from a serious car accident. I was sorry to hear of it – I hope things are all fine now?”

“Yes,” he replied shortly, growing increasingly more antagonized. It was obvious the man didn’t really care – in fact he was more curious than sympathetic.

“That’s good to know,” Tobias Budge smiled, like he couldn’t care less that the other man was essentially trying to edge away. “It’ll be nice to see more of you, Mister Graham-Lecter – artists always perform better when they’ve got the right audience.”

Will made a neutral noise of passive agreement.

The music drew to a trembling close and the man turned away to clap, swinging around the room to give out compliments to both young musicians. The little girl, referred to as Mirai, grinned broadly, showing off a gap in her teeth and almost began to wriggle in pleasure. Her glasses were dangerously close to sliding off her nose; Will fought against the parental instinct to push it up for her. Tomas’ smile was more subtle but no less pleased, and it lit up his face so beautifully that Will had to fight against getting emotional over it.

Tomas let the unfinished cello go with a little reluctance and gave his own thanks and compliment to the little girl before wandering back over.

Will placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and slid it over to clasp the nape of his neck, squeezing. “That was incredible.”

The boy beamed at him, “Thanks, dad.”

Tobias Budge stopped before them, the cello already back in its stand and presumably, ready to be taken away for completion now. “Now, please understand that the cello is essentially finished. However, I am going to change the pegs, change the strings to a new set and your custom tail spike is on the way in the post.”

The boy nodded, “Right.”

“Your current cello is a beginner’s instrument, made by a machine in a factory while your next cello will have been hand-crafted long before you were born – so,” Tobias Budge gave the boy a stern look, “In the interest of giving you a fair warning, don’t expect the finish to be flat or uniform or anything resembling the finish of your current instrument.”

The twelve-year old averted his eyes, smiling, obviously already dreaming of taking his new cello home and running his hands along that uneven finish.

The beta man slowly smiled. “Come back at the end of January. If you think that it sounds good now, wait until after I’ve had it adjusted and run it through its pace. I think you’ll be very pleased with the end product.”

Going by the eager nod and bright grin, Tomas couldn’t wait. Will slung an arm around the boy’s shoulder and squeezed, sharing in his son's buoyant mood.

“Thank you,” he said to the beta, meaning it.

Tobias Budge’s eyes fixed upon him, and the man’s smile widened. “You’re welcome, Mister Graham-Lecter. Please, come again.”

They turned to leave and Will already had the door open when abruptly, Tomas twisted back.

“Mister Budge, will you be at the concert this Saturday?”

The beta paused to look at them from the doorway to the main showroom, one hand flicking on some more lights in the rapidly dimming store. “Unfortunately no. I have a prior engagement with a client – but I’ll be there in spirit. Break a leg, Tomas.”

The boy smiled sweetly, “Yes, sir. See you after the holidays then, Mister Budge.”

His son slipped under Will’s arm and into the street, while he gave the owner of *Chordophone String Shop* one last long stare. The man didn’t notice his scrutiny and disappeared into the other room, calling for Mirai and encouraging her to play something before their time was up with the same spirit she had just shown before. There’s no reply from the girl, but presumably she agreed because a moment later, a new song began.

Will wondered what was going on. According to his watch, the last minute preparations should have been well underway and everyone should have already begun to settle in, stuff in lockers and instruments out of cases, yet there were dozens of anxious children and even more worried accompanying adults loitering in the foyer of the Meyerhoff. Several appointed ushers who volunteered with the orchestra for their charity events were making the rounds, smiling with false cheer and hiding their own uncertainty. Tomas turned to him with a frown, his nerves over the upcoming performance forgotten.

Squeezing the boy's shoulder as he passed, Will quickly rounded the corner and went down to the reception of the recital hall where the actual charity concert would take place, and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of uniformed officers manning the three doors. A woman in an FBI jacket exited the door on the left, and quickly hurried up the stairs to head for the exit. As the door lazily swung shut, Will caught a glimpse of people swarming the stage, all focused on something in the middle, and the unnatural flicker of flash photography.

One of the officers, a portly beta man of at least fifty with thinning hair, came towards him with his hand held up. "I'm sorry sir, but this area is restricted."

He started to ask the man what was going on but then, someone called his name.

Will turned. It was Mrs. Joan Mandeville, one of the organizers of the charity concert. The elderly woman with her white hair pulled back into a chignon hurried over, her usual neck scarf undone and hanging loose like a shawl and at complete odds with her preference for an orderly almost-regimental appearance. She was also hanging onto a glass of whiskey as if her life depended on it, and clutching her handbag to her chest like a security blanket.

"I am so glad to see you here – it's horrible, *just horrible*."

Will glanced between the stone-faced officers and the beta matron, "What's going on, Mrs. Mandeville?"

"Call me Joan, dear – Hannibal told me that you worked for the FBI, well, *I never*, I can't even describe to you what's in there. That poor, poor man – it's Albert, Albert Bresling. Oh, I'm going to have to call Carol. I don't know how she's going to react, she'll be *devastated*."

His brows furrowed as she took a deep breath, obviously shaken, and threw back the entire contents of her glass in one swallow.

"Mrs. Mandeville – Joan, take a deep breath."

She nodded and took a deep desperate gulp of air.

"Are you alright?" She nodded at him and took another gulp when he gestured for her to keep up the breathing. "What's going on? Everyone's waiting out there in the main foyer."

"Oh I *know*, dear, but I didn't know what else to do," She grabbed him by the hand, making him flinch at the force of her grip. Her handbag slid from its place being pinned by her elbow

and hit the floor; she utterly ignored it. “But we can’t let the children see what’s happened – they’re be traumatized for sure!”

Will wet his lips; so there was a crime scene, and an obviously graphic one considering the old woman’s state.

“Hannibal said you work for the FBI.”

“Well I’ve consulted but–”

She nodded and cut him off, “What do *we do*? What should *I say*?”

Will stared back at her for a second, at a loss, before his police training came back to him. “First, you need to get everyone to remain calm – that will only happen if you are, Mrs. Mandeville. Secondly, you need to figure out a way to let everyone who hasn’t arrived yet know that that they should stay put until further notice.”

She nodded eagerly and then suddenly spun on her heel, yelling, “*Walter*!”

Walter Mandeville the Third, son of Joan Fitzroy Mandeville, hurried over from where he had been chatting with a security guard. He was a tall bald beta of perhaps sixty with round merry features and a large nose, upon which wire-rimmed glasses sat; “Mother?”

She glanced around her son, “Where’s Barbara?

“She’s gone to call the other board members and get started on informing the parents – I think she’s also going to try and get Jocelyn to put up an announcement online.”

“*Oh thank God* for that girl,” Mrs. Mandeville gasped, almost sagging. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Yes, and that’s why I married her, the man’s genial smile said. He picked up the dropped handbag and placed a comforting arm around the woman’s shoulders, “Why don’t you sit down, mother?”

She shrugged him off with surprising force for how thin she was, “Sit *down*? No, Walter, *this is a disaster*! Someone’s been murdered in the very recital hall where the concert was to take place – and there are already almost a hundred people here. What next, Will?”

He looked between Mrs. Mandeville and her son, the elder gentleman turning to him with interest, and spun to address the uniforms. “Excuse me, officers, do you know how long this is going to take?”

One of the younger officers, an alpha female, shook her head with an apologetic frown. “I’m sorry, sir, but this could take all night and possibly longer – our department’s been requested by the FBI to maintain a presence here over the weekend.”

He nodded, extrapolating that it was probably a messy kill or perhaps something involving graphic mutilation, with lots to photograph and categorize, tag and bag. Considering where

they were, it was probably something staged – there were safer and easier places to dump a body than in the middle of the John Gidwitz Recital Hall stage.

He turned back to the mother-and-son philanthropist pair who both looked to him for instructions. “Okay, so it seems we have to either cancel the concert or move it somewhere else.”

“*Cancel* it?” The woman gasped at the same time as her son asked, “Move it? Where?”

Will nodded. “The hall is going to be an active crime scene for at least the rest of the weekend,”

“But the concert is in two hours!”

“And it’s not like we can use the main auditorium,” Walter Mandeville sighed, rubbing a hand over his weary forehead. Despite his show of being as even-keeled as always, the man was deeply affected by what had happened. “It’s booked tonight – for the Handel performance.”

“Oh of course,” Mrs. Mandeville nodded, and then clicked her fingers, “What about the University?”

Walter Mandeville nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, that might work if they’re free – and Reg Danvers owes us a favor too. I’ll make some calls, excuse me.”

As soon as he left, Mrs. Mandeville started deep breathing again. Will looked at her with some concern. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit down?”

She shook her head and shot him a terse smile, “Darling boy, if I sit down right now, they’d better be prepared to have me carried out of here. Thank you by the way; I probably would have thought of those things eventually but time isn’t something I have right now.”

A beat later, the main doors of the recital hall were pushed open, giving them both a good look at the main stage; Mrs. Mandeville flinched and turned away with a little whimper, hands tangling in her scarf as though they were the last handholds to sanity, before muttering that she needed another drink and fleeing. Will froze, uncertain what his eyes were interpreting.

“Will?” A familiar voice asked.

He blinked away the image, “Beverly?”

Beverly Katz snapped off her gloves and undid her hair tie, her purple leather jacket in direct contrast with the dark uniforms and FBI jackets walking around. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” He frowned.

Her brows furrowed as she gave him a little grin, “You’re not here for the crime scene?”

“I didn’t even know there was a crime scene until I arrived.”

“So Ed didn’t ask you to come down?”

Presumably she was referring to Edward Jason Moses, the man running the violent criminal apprehension program of the BAU under Josefina Sanchez’s oversight. Will supposed they’d exchanged a few interesting emails, but nowhere in any of them had the man asked him to consult nor had he offered to consult – and that was even before Hannibal revealed the turbulent relationship he’d had with the BAU.

“Dad?” A small voice cut in.

They both turned to see Tomas, looking uncertain with his hands tucked into his pockets as he wavered between staying where he was and taking the last two steps down into the reception area of John Gidwitz Recital Hall.

“Hey, Tomas,” Beverly greeted as Will hurried over and gave the boy a side-hug.

“Hey Bev,” Tomas’ smile was small but genuine.

Considering how intuitive all his children were, Will had no doubt that the twelve-year old probably already put Beverly's presence plus cops plus barred doors together and knew what was going on. He tightened his arm and pressed a kiss to the boy’s hairline, something he rarely did as the boy didn’t like to be babied. As expected, his son scrunched up his nose and wiped at the ‘mark’ where Will’s mouth had touched, irritated. Will congratulated himself on the distraction.

“Where’s your cello, Tomas?”

“I left it with Evan. He’s watching it with his brother.”

“Sorry I left, let’s call a cab and get out of here, okay?”

Tomas nodded and gave him another hug before running back up the stairs to reclaim his cello from his best friend.

“He was performing tonight?”

Will nodded with a wry but proud smile, “Yeah, first chair – it’ll be his first big performance so he’s been really excited about it too.”

“Oh,” Beverly’s smile fell a little, “Well, sorry then.”

“Yeah,” Will exhaled.

“Beverly,” someone called.

The alpha female glanced behind her and waved whoever it was off. “Hey, listen, are you sure you don’t want to have a look? It’s...” She took a breath, looking as though she was searching for words, “sort of up your alley.”

Will paused in his perusal of his phone to call Hannibal and raised his eyebrows. “I have an alley?”

“You have an alley,” she confirmed with a smirk, “We had a case like this – two years ago in fact,” so right before he was locked up, “You were a primary on the case.”

Shivering as though he could literally feel Hannibal breathing in his ear to stop and desist right now, Will tucked his phone back into his pocket, before wrapping his hand around it again, uncertain. “Well, I don’t see how I can help – since I can’t exactly remember the case.”

She gave him an unimpressed look, “It was in the files I sent you.”

“Yeah, of which I’ve hardly looked at.”

“Just,” Beverly shrugged and then glancing over to the staircase in case Tomas came back, visibly held back whatever she originally intended to say, “look at them, okay? The vic’s name was Douglas Wilson, he was a trombone player for the Metropolitan – the tabloids dubbed the unsub ‘the Maestro’ and we never got the guy.”

Translation – *we didn’t get the guy because you went off the rails, the BAU imploded and the FBI went into crisis-management mode*.

“You think he’s back?”

Beverly tied her hair back up again, this time into a bun, “Yeah, I do. Look, I know you're not on the case but – just have a look at that file, okay?”

Will nodded and left to join Tomas upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

There was a very sweet comment from one of the readers, and it made me so happy cos honestly, it came after a hellish day/night of suffering and it was just a nice thing to see upon opening your email. Thank you to all who read and comment and kudos.
And also, yes, Tobias Budge enters the scene! Plot thickens some more - wait till you meet everyone else (I was deliberately spare with character tags) including all the OCs

Devotissimo suo

Chapter Notes

> Fluff with angsty moments - and a bit of plot, and a dash of ginger (Freddie Lounds)
> WARNING - there's allusions to non-con in a dream, not actual non-con but being strapped down as you would if you were a mental patient and having your agency taken by being forcibly undressed etc. Please if this disturbs you, skip over it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were *looking* at him, like an animal at a petting zoo, like a specimen. There was metal on his wrists and ankles, and large suffocating strips of cloth across his torso – he felt embalmed, entombed even. He remained calm and did not fight any of it, but his eyes were wet as he suffered the indignity of being gagged, of being trussed, shackled, bolted, chained, *immobilized*. He accepted the reality of where he was, barely breathing the stale cold air as the ceiling moved above him and the world drifted from him.

Will closed his eyes, exhaling, sinking, drowning in surrender – and jerked upright, sweating and gasping for breath in an overly soft bed, Hannibal's bed, *his own bed*.

He had been in a prison, a mental institution, the walls had been a creamy travertine – pockmarked like they'd been sprayed in a hail of bullets – and then a dark, stony charcoal, and he'd been unable to move, barely able to breathe. They'd cut off his clothes, scissors slicing a cool line across his prickled skin, because they'd been too frightened to let him have his hands free to remove them himself. His coat, his shirt, his under-shirt, his pants, his underwear. Someone had cut through the waist band of his pants, clumsy blunt rubber-clad fingers sliding along the skin of his buttocks to tear it the rest of the way, unwrapping him, letting the seams rip open, peeling it down his legs. He wanted to vomit, because they had no right – *no right* – to touch him like that.

The darkness seemed insidious as it pressed in on him from all sides, and he had to clamp a hand over his mouth to stifle the whimper that wanted to escape, a pitiful disgusting sound.

The bedside light switched on, breaking the weight of the dark.

"Will?"

Throwing off the blankets, Will rushed to the en suite bathroom. He turned on the tap and barely restrained from just holding his head under it, letting the sound of the water drown out the squeak-squeak-squeak of the unoiled hinges of the wheels still needling at his ears. It took a few splashes and a good rub before he's sagging against the broad marble countertops, a faint taste of something sour lingering on his tongue.

Behind him, Hannibal made a little sound – his mouth, pursing that way he did, trying to find the right words. So careful with him, this alpha. A towel was handed over and Will took it with a nod of thanks.

“I remembered something.”

Hannibal stilled, alert despite the fact that his expression in the mirror had not changed.

“What did you remember?”

Will dropped the wet towel on the counter, uncertain what the right words were when you were about to tell your mate of thirteen years that your screwed-up mind decided to reconstruct the worst moments of your life, when it couldn’t even be bothered to let you find the memories of your first date together or the birth of your children. “I was being undressed – they undressed me.”

The alpha didn’t say anything but his eyes, reflected in the mirror, were unhappy.

“They took samples,” he said tonelessly, “Hair, saliva, skin, blood – everything.”

There’s no hesitation as Hannibal reached up and squeezed a shoulder. Will turned around and shuddered as he burrowed into the man’s arms, taking the silently offered comfort. It felt nice, good – so *right*, he almost wished he could fall asleep here, like this, the bathroom tiles biting away at his toes with cold. Hannibal exhaled slowly, propped his chin on top of Will’s head and wrapped a hand around his nape, smelling of that spice and smoke which characterized him.

The nausea drained away under the steady warmth of the embrace and the scent of *alpha*.

“I’m sorry.”

Will chuckled bitterly, muffled against the man’s collar. “What for? I’m the one who’s keeping you up again.”

After the entire craziness of the weekend with the children’s charity concert being abruptly uprooted and thrown into the John Hopkins main campus rec hall – compliments to Mrs. Mandeville and Walter Mandeville III, since they managed to pull it off somehow – they’d indulged in a lie-in the next day only to be interrupted by an urgent call from one of Hannibal’s at-risk patients, followed by another full week. Truthfully, he didn’t know how the alpha kept up with the pace, as things just got busier and busier in the lead-up to winter break. Thank goodness for the upcoming weekend in D.C. away from the children; which he felt bad about but accepted as necessary, because Hannibal worked hard and deserved to have a night off doing what he enjoyed – in this case, rubbing shoulders with his social peers at the Smithsonian for a preview look at some ancient Chinese war-craft exhibit – and according to Alana, Kathy and just about everyone, it was a good opportunity for them to spend time alone together.

In the past fortnight, Will had tried to pitch in more as he slowly came to realize just how much Hannibal was doing behind the scenes to ensure everything ran smoothly, which went

way, *way* beyond stuffing sausages or salting ham. He wasn't sure if his help was having any real impact on the workload but Hannibal seemed to appreciate it. On the plus side, being more tired helped with the dreams; though evidently not enough.

"I shouldn't have told you about everything – I was warned against it, in fact," the alpha paused, nuzzling against Will's hair – it didn't seem like he knew he was doing it, "It's quite possible that with your singularly unique imagination, that I might have led you to such visions."

"What? *No* – no, *how* is that –?" Will would have pulled away if the alpha didn't run a hand through his hair. The sensation of it, the tingles coursed down his spine like – he didn't even know how to describe it. He swallowed, fingers twitching even as he shuffled a little closer.

"It might be considered '*leading*,' what I've revealed – some would say it was irresponsible of me to put such thoughts in your head."

He made a face against Hannibal's shoulder, his irritation at knowing people were still trying to manage him puncturing the last bubbles of fear still soaking his lungs. "So letting me go out there like *an idiot*, completely ignorant of everything, *that's better*?"

There's that sound again, of the alpha's mouth parting to speak and then pausing, choosing his words. "I want you to remember the best of our life together," the murmur was so soft against Will's hair, "not the worst."

Will pulled away, because he was sick and tired of all this screwing around – wait, they all said, let the memories come to you, and if they didn't, you still had your husband and your children and your health and your mind. But he didn't really have that last one, did he?

Will had spent the week almost devouring *Tattle-crime.com* after being pointed to the tabloid blog by Hannibal in answer to some of his more involved questions regarding his past with the FBI. The alpha had advised him that though the writer – one Freddie Lounds – was essentially a stalker with a Dictaphone and a highly confrontational individual (alpha female, with a broken home, possibly foster-care, Will already knew without meeting her) she covered almost every case he'd consulted upon, as well as every homicide in the tri-state that might be linked to the various serial killers identified by the BAU. It didn't answer all of his questions but it was a good start. It also helped him see how he might have become a likely suspect, especially if there were others who felt similarly to Freddie Lounds.

He also hoped he never met the woman in a dark alley – Will wasn't sure he could control himself from dealing grievous bodily harm to the *cow*.

He met Hannibal's eyes in challenge. "Then tell me something good – to balance it out."

There's a tiny sleepy smile on the alpha's face – *such pride in his mate, the frame to his masterpiece* – as his hands curled over Will's shoulders. "Let's get you back into bed first."

Suddenly weighed down from many nights of poor sleep, he cracked a weak smile and nodded, let the alpha lead him to bed, let Hannibal pull the covers away so he could lay down

and have the covers tucked around him. The alpha rounded the bed and joined him, flopping down with a lassitude that Will wouldn't expect from someone so dignified.

Hannibal's eyes shuttered close, a tired but fond smile on his face.

Will rolled onto his side to face the man and wondered if he'd have to poke him to get his story, and then felt bad about thinking like that since it was only Friday tomorrow and the man had patients to see.

"When our courtship began," the alpha murmured, eyes-closed, voice rough with sleep, "I used to pretend that I had business every second weekend in New Orleans."

Will hid a smirk. "You were shot down weren't you?"

There was a pointed but good-humored pause.

"As you refused to give me your number, I sent you flowers with the details of the hotel and how long I would be in town, first to the police station – you would call, so very cross with me," Hannibal chuckled and opened his eyes a sliver, "And then later, to Laurie House once I'd finally talked the address out of you."

Will's eyes widened, "Oh please *no*."

Hannibal just smirked.

There was a reason why he had liked living at Laurie – besides the weekly cleaning service and two included meals a day – he always had a legitimate excuse not to bring any dates over, as anyone who was not an omega wasn't allowed past the front reception and the doors were locked promptly at 11PM. Will and a few others had key privileges to the backdoor courtesy of their odd working hours, but generally speaking, everyone was back by curfew and in bed or tucked up in the public lounge watching late night talk shows. Having someone like Hannibal show up at the doors was like throwing a ball into a flock of pigeons.

The alpha shifted onto his side and reaching up, ran a hesitant hand through Will's hair, "You had longer hair then... it used to get in your eyes; every time we met, you used to smile mischievously down at the floor like you were resisting the urge to tell me something terribly unflattering, for fear of my ego being bruised."

Will raised both eyebrows but didn't shy from the touch, "I'm sure that happened regularly enough."

"It did."

And the alpha seemed delighted about that. Will's brow furrowed even as his mouth tugged into a smile, because what an odd, *odd* man.

Hannibal made a little noise, something between a sigh and a tired hum, and then inexplicably, they were lying together in the middle of the bed, Will's right cheek pressed against a clavicle. The disorientation of being so close to someone, something he hadn't done

since he was perhaps seven years old, floated away as he sank into the simple pleasure of it all; no sex, just warm bodies and laziness.

“One day, having decided to take a small holiday, I flew down on Wednesday evening with the intention of surprising you on your day off,” Hannibal told him, a rumble against Will’s ear.

Will closed his eyes. He could almost see it; kissing at the door in the darkness like teenagers, having the lights switched on because Miss Delia would like to see this young gentlemen of yours, Will Graham, stop keeping him to yourself; the seventy-four year old manageress of Laurie House for omegas would have loved Hannibal Lecter, Will knew. She would have cooed over the flowers (*useless and frivolous*, he’d rather receive a leg of ham), the gifts (Hannibal seemed the type) but she would have stood in those hibiscus-print dresses of hers and stared the psychiatrist down like she was the Queen of England herself, for Will’s honor – well, until she heard the man speak.

“I didn’t tell you about my plans – it was very rude of me I’m aware – and simply showed up at your residence.”

He saw in his mind’s eye, being picked up by Hannibal, so suave in his suits with the pocket squares and the perfectly-ironed collar; the other boarders all trying desperately not to seem like they were spying from the dining room/kitchen/TV area; Will stumbling downstairs half-asleep in just t-shirt and shorts, flustered by Hannibal’s arrival and being smacked by a tea-towel to get some clothes on, *dear oh dear*, you have a visitor, Mister Graham – honestly, kids these days; Will broke out into chuckles that quickly turned choked because thirteen years, *thirteen years*.

Hannibal’s mouth pressed against the top of his head, and tightened the arm around him, his other hand leaving Will’s hair to caress his jaw and squeeze the base of his neck, gentling him. The sense of panic receded.

“Miss Delia is dead.”

“Yes,” the alpha breathed against his hair, “I know.”

“Did I make the funeral?”

“Sadly, you were still recovering in hospital – I made sure to send a very tasteful wreath along with condolences to the family.”

Will nodded and exhaled, feeling a little of the tightness in his chest ease. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the alpha breathed, half-asleep and almost too hoarse to be understood, “But unnecessary... she was very dear to many.”

For a moment it seemed like they would drop off like this, but then Will tilted his head to study the alpha’s face, trying to imagine how the man would have looked at thirty-three, when they had met. Hannibal cracked open an eye.

“Counting my wrinkles?”

“That’s *not*, um,” Will stammered, flustered to be caught staring and unnerved that the alpha had practically read his mind.

Hannibal chuckled in the back of his throat and shifted to get more comfortable – and closer still, emboldened by his successes in breaching the boundaries that had encased the younger man since his return home – and stroked a thumb along the side of Will’s throat, while his arm curved over his omega’s back. It was one step away from being *cradled*. And it felt...good, better than good, safe and comfortable and just...

“Get some sleep, Will.”

For a few minutes, Will remained awake, listening to the alpha’s steady heartbeat, the night birds, the creaks and shudders of the house settling, the peaceful silence coming from the baby monitor, the gentle little puffs against his hair as Hannibal slumbered. Then he closed his eyes too.

The shopping village was packed, which was unsurprising since it was the last Friday evening before Christmas. Will could only imagine the mayhem over the weekend, and was glad that he wasn’t braving any of the lines – apparently, everything was being delivered to the house. Santa Claus was emphatically banned from the decorations – Hannibal had *views* about the monstrous spawn of consumerism and mangled Catholic canon – though Rudolph’s many relatives were allowed to set up camp in the form of beautiful metal sculptures, looking more like art than Christmas decor, and intricate hand-made Christmas displays from Käthe Wohlfahrt; yeah, Will had no idea what or who that was either, but the children loved it.

Coming to see the Christmas tree set up in the shopping village square had been a novelty, and almost fun, despite his initial concerns about losing the kids, or something equally terrible. The kids had all behaved, as Hannibal had very clearly laid out the rules before they left the house as well as the rewards for keeping them. Will couldn’t help smiling in memory at the way Eli and Micah’s eyes had widened in greed at the thought of having chocolate cake made by Papa next week, provided they stuck by Papa or Daddy’s side all night.

Wearing a fresh diaper now, Hannibal Junior kicked happily, thinking the smile was for him.

“Will?”

He stood up, surprised, “Kathy?”

Kathy Prescott beamed at him warmly and grabbed a shoulder in greeting before crouching down to give the toddler a tickle on the tummy. “I’ve never seen you here – last minute shopping?”

“No, it’s done, we just came to see the tree,” he told her, and turned to look for Hannibal and the other children when he realized she wasn’t alone.

“Hello Will,” the alpha female greeted, “It’s lovely to see you again.”

Startled, it took him a second to process who was standing by Kathy Prescott. A moment later, a hot blustery sensation ran through him as he realized that the woman indirectly responsible for his stint at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane was in front of him, smiling at him brightly like they were long-lost acquaintances.

“Kathy,” Freddie Lounds tilted her head, a mockery of surprise, “You didn’t tell me you were friends with Will Graham. What a small world.”

“You know each other?” Will asked shortly, barely keeping his voice under control.

Her eyes shifting between the two of them, Kathy smiled, brows furrowed a little in confusion. “Yeah we’ve used the same hairdresser for years – do you know each other?”

Will narrowed his eyes, somewhat relieved that the tabloid reporter hadn’t approached the beta specifically to get at him – *small world indeed.* “She’s a reporter.”

“I run a blog,” she explained to Kathy, placing a casual hand on the woman’s arm – Will wanted to slap it off, “It’s hardly the same.”

“It’s a *news* blog,” he said sharply, “specifically covering violent homicides – serial killers.”

“More of an editorial,” Freddie Lounds gave him a broad smile, and turned that same look on the beta, “He’s just being complimentary.”

The nerves of the woman, “I’m really not,” he muttered darkly.

Kathy raised an eyebrow in his direction, a look that promised they would be speaking of this later, Professor Graham, but she reserved judgement for the moment.

Stepping forward and bending down to coo at Hannibal Junior, the alpha female looked up at him with her big eyes, appearing almost genuinely sympathetic – some of it was real, that’s true, he wasn’t number one on her suspect list, but he was still a suspect. “How have you been, Will? You were a victim of the Butcher after all, and one of the lucky few to get away still breathing.”

Clenching his hands around the handlebar of the stroller, Will resisted the urge to resort to incendiary language in front of Kathy, whom he still wanted to keep as a friend despite her rather unfortunate connection to Lounds. Not that he would be able to show his face around the beta if Freddie spread whatever lie she had up her sleeve for today.

“Thank goodness they caught the ploy and you were released,” She continued blithely, totally ignoring the daggers Will was practically jamming into her temples with his eyes. She puckered her mouth and tutted at Junior, who frowned at her. “It would have been so terrible if they hadn’t – where would Junior be then, eh?”

Kathy gave him a confused look, trying to read between the lines. Will's heart sank. He had seen the newspaper headlines in the national papers – third page, not first, thank goodness – which covered the alleged secret trial of an FBI employee, name redacted, accused of being the Butcher due to overwhelming forensic evidence; unfortunately, not a single member of the agency used their brains and actually point out that the accused, being omega, pregnant and suffering a serious illness just couldn't be their culprit, simply due to practicality, and almost killed their suspect via sheer stupidity before the real Butcher killed again and claimed responsibility for the frame-up. Kathy would have read it – as would have anyone who picked up a newspaper around then – and with Freddie Lounds practically banging pots and pans over it, it wasn't a matter of *if* but *when* Kathy connected the dots.

"He's adorable, how old is he now?"

"Twenty months," Will muttered, resigned.

"You're a big boy, aren't you?" She smiled at the toddler, saccharine sweet.

Hannibal Junior screwed up his eyebrows and ducked his head to the side, hiding. Will swallowed down the urge to grab her by the head and hurl her away from his child.

"What was I doing then?" She pondered aloud and then nudged Kathy, like everything was just fine and they were all old friends having a chat, "Oh yes, that alleged omega abuse case by the FBI; I believe the agency held the poor thing under unsavory conditions and they ended up getting Galinthy's sickness and almost died – it was a complete scandal."

Will took a deep breath, and deliberately avoided looking at anywhere except his hands clenching around the handles of Junior's stroller. In his peripheral vision, Kathy was starting to look uncomfortable. He knew the moment it dawned on her, what Lounds was referring to – she took a little breath, and visibly forced herself to stop blurting out the first question that sprang to mind.

The tabloid writer bounced to her feet, almost cheerful. "Will you be offering your insight on the reopened Maestro case?"

He shook his head, not sure he could speak without spitting on the woman. Ed Moses had emailed him about the case but Will hadn't answered his questions in any detail except to skim over the photos of the new homicide and confirm that it was the same unsub.

Tucking her hands in her pocket, Freddie Lounds shifted onto one hip, cocky. "He's struck again you know – last weekend, at Johns Hopkins University, one of their auditoriums."

Will looked from Kathy's sensible ankle boots, heeled, soft pelt, round-toed and dove-grey, to Freddie Lounds' boots, lace-ups, pointed, croc-skin in the color of rust, unwilling to show his alarm at the new information. The coincidence of a body dump in two places related to the children's concert was undeniable. And Freddie Lounds *had to know it.*

"Event organiser arrived to set up for the faculty ball," she said, deceptively pleasant, as though she were telling the story of how she rescued a cat from a tree, "and instead found a 'human cello' on display. Any thoughts, Will? A scoop for the holidays?"

“I’m not consulting on the case,” he managed to get out without showing his teeth.

Freddie Lounds raised both eyebrows, “Well, I’m sorry to hear that. It seems very irresponsible of our Bureau to ignore such a resource like yourself.”

Will bristled at the reference to her views on his ‘instability’ but bit his tongue; exploding in public, not to mention in front of his impressionable one-year old was only going to hurt him in the long run.

“Are you sure you have no insights to offer? The first victim – or should I say second victim – was killed and staged almost identically to Douglas Wilson – the Maestro’s first *piece*, shall we say,” Lounds pulled out a card from her small shoulder bag and offered it to him between two fingers, like they were exchanging gum or something. “I’m always interested in having a fresh perspective on things. Surely with your ten years of experience with the Bureau, you must have some thoughts on the case.”

Still painfully aware that Kathy was watching the entire farce, Will took the deceptively innocent business card, feeling almost nauseous. “Not really. I have to go, I have to – Hannibal and the kids,” he stammered, looking at the beta and imploring her to understand, “I need to go.”

“Okay,” Kathy nodded easily, even managing to give him a smile, “See you down at the park sometime.”

He swallowed down his rush of horror and dismay that the woman had just inadvertently revealed more information about him to Freddie Lounds, and wondered if there was any way to warn off the beta from associating with the soul-sucking bitch without sounding either paranoid or crazy. In the end he just nodded brusquely and hurried away, head-down as he tried not to bend under the crushing weight of all those night terrors, and everything that came with them.

He saw Hannibal as soon as he entered the main square, and barely managed to respond to the eager wave that Micah gave him when the alpha pointed Will out to the little boy. Looking debonair as always despite having a four-year old clinging to him, Hannibal stood apart from the crowd though he was dressed in one of his more modest outfits. His smile was welcoming until he caught the expression that Will wasn’t wearing.

To his relief, instead of waiting for Will to work his way over, Hannibal was by his side in a few long strides, parting the crowd like a shark charging through raging waters.

“Will?” He asked as he let Micah down from his arms.

The little boy clung to the side of Hannibal’s trench coat and stared up at both of them, solemn.

Will took a breath to explain, say something instead of just blinking at the floor like an idiot, but it caught in his throat. Hannibal touched a shoulder and that’s all it took; he was burrowing into the alpha’s side, mouth clamped shut to keep himself from making noises like some pitiful wreck. No one stopped to look, because there were plenty of families out tonight

and an alpha gentling his mate was nothing new. He still felt humiliated though, and was grateful when Hannibal didn't hesitate, reacting as if this kind of embrace was normal for them. Maybe it had been, *before*, but now it just feels a bit like he's overstepping; they've grown close, but not this close.

The world receded under the firm embrace, the arm curled around his head pressing him firmly to Hannibal's neck, the point of the alpha's chin upon Will's temple – muffled sounds, no sight, only the smell of something smoky, indefinable, the imprint of a familiar *alpha*.

It's incredible how effective it was – thirty seconds into the gentling, instead of being two steps away from fragmenting over the pavement, Will felt exhausted but somewhat able to think again, though that seemed to only make his embarrassment worse.

The sound of Elizabeta's boot clicks pierced through his daze.

"Is daddy okay?" She asked, her voice a stage whisper.

Hannibal's chin left its resting spot on Will's temple but his other arm came up to wrap around him, stroking the expanse of his back like he was cold or something and needed to be warmed up. "He'll be fine, he just needs a moment," the alpha murmured, his voice rumbling through flesh and bone to tickle Will's ear. "Remember our talk, Eli, about appropriate behaviour around omegas."

"Yes, papa," she agreed demurely, and then Will felt her small hand petting him on the back in circles. "It's okay, daddy, Tomas plays beautiful music because he's an omega but he always needs alone time and more hugs – you're special like him, you should hug it out too."

Will choked on a startled laugh. His alpha daughter was comforting him. Hannibal had *taught* their daughter to comfort him when he was distressed. She wasn't confused or frightened or defensive – and she probably never will be in the face of Will losing it, because Hannibal was her bedrock and her bedrock had educated her to respect an omega's need for gentling.

Feeling more in control, he pulled back. Hannibal craned his neck back to look at him, a fond light in his eyes as he brushed Will's hair back like this was all just normal, nothing to be awkward over. "Do you feel up to some dinner? I believe Micah is hungry."

Still not sure about speaking, Will nodded.

The kiss against his forehead was tender and ran through his body like a spark. Hannibal released him from the full-body embrace but wound Will's arm around his own; Will swallowed thickly at the blush of warmth that hit him - for they were arm-in-arm, like an old married couple.

"Eli, take Micah's hand. Tomas, do you mind being responsible for Junior? Thank you."

And then they were making their way through the public square, trying to avoid the large Christmas tree display in the middle where the crowd was heaviest, and turning down one of the pedestrian streets for the restaurants. They ended up going into the first place they pass, some Italian chain restaurant which looked very much like the kind of place that Will had

always been too anxious to enter because of all the families and noise, but which Hannibal would vehemently avoid because the napkins were cheap two-ply paper and there was only one fork on the table per person.

The beta server – college girl, blond, generic – who greeted them at the door literally froze in shock at Hannibal requesting a table for six in that imperious but friendly manner he had; Will went from feeling faintly embarrassed for himself to hiding a grin at the bizarre sight of the alpha, wearing a five-thousand dollar tailored suit, directing the children into a faux-leather horseshoe booth and asking for a high-chair. Half the eyes in the place glance over as they pass but their interest was brief, the novelty of seeing a well-to-do alpha-omega family in the establishment passing quickly. Considering where the shopping village was, the customers were almost expecting it; after all, even alpha-omega families would have the occasional pizza night too, right?

In the privacy of the booth, they're anonymous, just another family enjoying dinner out on a Friday night. There's a table of college co-eds in the booth next to them, but they're keeping their voices down out of the respect for the kids around. Will ended up boxed in with Elizabeta to his right and Hannibal on his left. Junior fussed initially at being made to sit in the high-chair and being only within kicking distance of Papa, but calmed down once he was given his dinner, his hand mashing omelet and pumpkin chunks enthusiastically into his mouth with surprising accuracy. It's got to be sorcery or something, for the alpha's charm seemed to even work on getting Junior to behave himself.

Everyone was comfortable, settled; no one looked askance at him, or tried to ask him how he was, or tried to pretend he wasn't there to avoid the awkwardness of having to ask how he was. Within a few minutes, orders had been taken – gourmet pizzas all around, naturally – Micah was happily coloring in the picture provided by their accommodating waitress, and Eli was telling them about how one of her friends, Victoria, was going with her family to Dallas for the holidays, because that's where her grandparents lived – and Papa, were they going to the cabin this year, because she missed the milkshakes made by that place in Middleburg – as though nothing unusual had occurred at all.

"We own a small cabin in Loudoun County," Hannibal explained in response to Will's quizzical gaze, "It's somewhat close to Middleburg, a small town 40 miles from DC."

"Middleburg," Micah suddenly said, breaking away from his coloring to tell Daddy very seriously that, "They have horses."

"Oh *yes*," Eli picked up the subject with enthusiasm, "They have *lots* of horses and ponies, daddy, for the hunting every year – and Mrs. MacDonald's got a rose garden, and she plays the cello so she always invites us over for tea because Tomas plays the cello too; she owns a huge piano! But I'm not allowed to touch it."

Which is a good thing, Tomas' sarcastic but fond glance at his sister said.

Will took a sip of the sparkling water ordered for the table and felt his mouth lift in a smile. "I see."

Under the table, Hannibal's hand found his clenched fist and rubbed over his knuckles whenever he wasn't occupied with feeding the toddler.

"You're early," Will said as he opened the door, only to freeze because, "You're not Alana."

The wiry beta man with bristly grey hair, dark winter coat and navy scarf smiled, "I'm not Doctor Bloom, no – sorry to drop on you like this, Mister Graham, I'm Ed Moses–

"Yes, right," Will's brows furrowed as his mind cast itself in a dozen directions all at once, and his hand tightened over the door knob, ready to slam it in the man's face. "We've emailed, I remember you – why are you here? It's Saturday."

Not to mention, it was nine in the morning, Alana was coming over for brunch, a thank you for babysitting this weekend, and Hannibal still couldn't decide between which waistcoat he wanted to bring to their D.C. weekender and they were supposed to leave within two hours. Will had been purposely ignoring all emails from Beverly and even avoided the most recent email from Rob Papparella, taking the alpha's advice in keeping well away from anything related to the BAU until after the new year to avoid the stress; as that run-in with Freddie Lounds had proven, he wasn't dealing well with the knowledge that his worst fear had come to past, even if he couldn't remember the events anymore – well, except in nightmares.

The man's smile didn't waver an iota, still cool and professional in the face of that sharp rejoinder. Maybe he was always well-keeled, or maybe someone had warned him about Will's manners, because he actually asked, "May I come in?"

The younger man stared, frankly a little bewildered at the agent's sheer unflappable ease; it wasn't even arrogance, it was just...a steadiness.

"Will? Is it Alana?"

He turned around to answer but before he could, the alpha was at the door, still dressed in pajamas and his robe with Junior propped on one hip. There's a tiny flicker to Hannibal's expression at the sight of the stranger, but a second later, he's smiling genially.

"Good morning. Who's this, Will?"

"Doctor Lecter, I'm Agent Edward Moses of the BAU," The beta tipped his head, voice low and without inflection, "I'm so sorry to be interrupting your brunch plans, but might I borrow a moment of your husband's time? It'll just be a moment."

Say no, say no, Will chanted mentally, even as part of him sat up in curiosity at what was so important that the man who had taken over from Jack Crawford wanted to see him on Saturday morning.

Instead of answering for him, the alpha turned to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Have you finished packing, Will?”

He had.

Realizing that Hannibal was giving him the autonomy to make his own decision about whether or not he’d see the FBI agent, Will hesitated before nodding; despite his misgivings the beta wouldn’t come to him unless it was important.

“Please,” Hannibal smiled, stepping back, “Come in.”

With a grateful nod, Edward Moses of the BAU’s violent criminal apprehension program came inside.

Hannibal looked up from where he was fixing their coffees. “Sugar?”

“Ah, no, thank you, black is fine.”

Will wiped down the toddler’s nose and chin, his happiness at the stream of babble coming from the exceptionally talkative Junior this morning dampened by the presence of their unexpected visitor. Putting a few more cubes of sweet potato on the toddler’s plate, Will took the coffee passed to him with a sigh of thanks. He took a deep drink as he swapped places with the alpha and faced Ed Moses.

The man stood casually in the middle of the kitchen and sipped his coffee, as if he hadn’t noticed the subtle power play made in not taking his coat and denying him a seat. Will knew the man had noticed – he wouldn’t be a supervisory agent of the BAU if such a simple psychological trick could fly in under his radar – but it just *didn’t* bother him.

“Don’t mind me,” Hannibal said into the terse silence, “Feel free to use the dining room, Will - it’s empty right now.”

But not for long, was the implication, so you better be quick, Agent Moses.

Will gestured for the man to go before him and closed the glass doors behind him. As expected, the beta zeroed in on the herb garden like everyone else; it really was a very outlandish thing to have. “Your house is beautiful, Mister Graham.”

“Thank you,” he said, shutting down his first instinct of telling the man that this was Hannibal’s house. It *was his house*, it had been and would be again. He crossed his arms, “What did you need to tell me about that couldn’t wait until Monday?”

Ed Moses nodded, “Yes, I don’t know if you’ve been keeping up with the news but the Maestro has been striking once a week, usually over the weekend.”

Will glanced away, studying the twists and bends of the antlers mounted among the greenery of the herb garden, directly opposite the painting which sat over the fireplace. “I’ve heard.”

“In your records, you profiled the unsub as an experienced killer, who was branching out and putting on a performance for a specific audience, perhaps even one particular individual.”

Will frowned, because the man was just repeating things from the old file – when was he going to get to the point? “Yes, because you have to be not only confident but comfortable with your kills if you’re going to be actively handling a corpse– do you know how heavy a dead body is? It’s *really* heavy – so you’d literally be hugging a corpse to move it unless you have a friend, or possibly two.”

Maybe he shouldn’t be saying this to an FBI agent from the BAU.

It was comments like these that had gotten tongues wagging in the first place and ended with him shackled to a table facing an interrogation light. Will rubbed his eyes, exhausted despite having just woken up twenty-minutes ago.

“I’m pretty sure letting your friends know you’re the type of person who likes to cut people’s throats open and turn them into instruments, is a *bad* way to keep friends.”

He should probably also try to sound less sarcastic.

“Look, I haven’t really got anything to add to my analysis two years ago, which I know you’ve read. Can you please just tell me what this is about?”

Pulling a file from the suitcase he was carrying, Ed Moses placed it down the dining table. “As of last night, the unsub has officially taken eight victims.”

Will spun to face the man, confused. “It’s been a fortnight.”

Two weekends – two victims, well, not including the first kill, Douglas Wilson. That was still just three though...

The beta nodded and flipped over the file, spreading several photos over the dining table. Will had the sudden urge to shove them all off, because God, his children ate at this table. “The first was Albert Bresling – he’s a member of...”

“The board for the Metropolitan Orchestra,” Will finished.

Ed Moses didn’t pretend to act surprised. “Yes. The second victim was Jerry Diamond, he was a member of the Baltimore Chamber Symphony, played the violin for them.”

Will nodded shortly. Yes, the man who had been paid to play with the Youth Orchestra to prop up the sound, but had instead shown up stinking like a distillery on the day of the concert; Mrs. Mandeville’s disapproval could have flattened mountains.

“And the latest victims,” the older man turned the photos around to Will’s perspective and pushed them forward. He started listing out the names and bios of the dead but Will wasn’t listening anymore.

He picked up the photo of the grotesque, almost fantasy-like display of the string quartet, set up in the middle of a park pavilion covered in fairy lights for the holidays. Only instead of actual instruments, the ‘musicians’ all had their throats cut, the necks of two violins, a cello, and a viola jutting out from their open mouths like some abnormal growth, dressed in the dark and bland formal wear of all professional musicians. It took effort to turn from that and look at the third victim, an old woman who was staged just like Douglas Wilson, throat-cut, vocal cords treated, only her forearms had been sliced open – also post-mortem judging by the wounds, quite likely on scene while she was being staged going by the blood dribbles on the floor.

“What was removed?” He asked.

“As far as our examination could tell, nothing.”

Will nodded, and stopped as a thought struck him; “He’s manipulating the corpse.”

“What do you mean?”

He put the photos down and took a sip of his coffee, half-forgotten upon the table. “He’s started playing with the bodies, like the way a cat does when learning to hunt. As I said he doesn’t usually kill this way – the cut wrists, stereotypical Hollywood suicide image, he was feeling whimsical.”

He was *bored*, and starting to get a taste for it.

“The intended recipient of his serenade hasn’t responded, but the unsub is starting to enjoy himself. He’s experimenting – and as you can see, escalating.”

Ed Moses nodded thoughtfully, and then paused, “There was something interesting about the wounds on the arms.”

Will looked up.

“Fine grain wood powder; spruce and maple.”

“You use those to make the bodies of violins and cellos.” Ed Moses nodded in agreement. The pieces drew themselves together in his head and started to take form. Will pinched the bridge of his nose. “What kind of scalpel was used?”

“As far as we could tell, it wasn’t a regular scalpel – at least not the type used in surgery. Agent Katz has put forward the idea of it being a Japanese-style dovetail chisel that’s been sharpened.”

“She’s probably right,” Will’s brows furrowed as a thought came to him, “Where are their instruments?”

The senior FBI agent opened his mouth to reply and then closed it again, “We haven’t checked. The quartet weren’t scheduled for any performances last night and so we’ve been looking into the abduction angle.”

Will frowned, “Did we ever find Douglas Wilson’s instrument?”

Ed Moses paused for a moment, head tilting before saying with growing unease, “No, I’m not sure that we did.”

Will picked up his coffee, walking to the far door into the dining room as he thought. Along the way, he paused to check that none of the children were downstairs yet. He really didn’t want them to see or hear any of this. “He’s not a professional musician but he does play, maybe he once was a pro but he’s a teacher now or a critic or somehow makes a living in a related field to his music career; he’s a *craftsman*, he won’t just be someone who can play an instrument, he can repair it and possibly even build his own instruments...”

His voice petered out as the pieces inside of his head slammed into each other, bulging and twisting as they merged into something identifiable. “There’s a shop, *Chordophone String Shop* – you need to question the owner. He’s a beta, but he fits the profile.”

Ed Moses straightened, “Tobias Budge?”

Will turned, surprised. “Yes, that’s right.”

“We questioned him two years ago, but there wasn’t enough evidence to have him brought in as a suspect or probable cause to get a search warrant.”

“Question him again – even if he has alibis, he should be able to point you in the right direction; you can’t buy the neck of a cello or violin from any random music shop, after all. If the unsub made them himself, he'll need materials, tools - Budge is a licensed luthier, he'd have easy access to all of that.”

The FBI agent nodded, and began to pack up. “Thank you again, Mister Graham, it’s been enlightening. Again, I’m sorry for showing up unannounced – I’ll show myself out, enjoy your breakfast.”

Will nodded and followed the man only so far as to confirm the click of the door.

Then he went back to the kitchen, determined to shake off the unease that the federal agent had brought with him into the house.

He arrived to the sight of Hannibal throwing an egg into the air to the toddler’s great delight, and somehow managed to crack it with his steel spatula, in mid-air, gravity forcing the egg’s soft shell into the sharp wedge of metal. The alpha’s fingers deftly picked up the halved shell fragments from where they were about to slide off the spatula and into the pan with the egg itself, and threw it in the small stainless steel bin he kept on the counter when he was cooking. When he caught Will staring, he smiled smugly and repeated the trick.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to play with our food.”

Hannibal’s smile only widened as he picked up the pan and with a little shake, flipped the eggs like a pro, “There are exceptions to every rule.”

Chapter End Notes

I was feeling better the last two days and so wrote more - sorry, it's still all just build up, as I needed the Hannigram to be comfy and secure by the time Tobias showed his true colours
Also I have like changed little things since I first posted this 8 hours ago - as I'm writing this that is - and that's just cos I'm pedantic and neurotic like that, I always fact-check everything or have a reason to adapt the name of the place etc.

Tempo al tempo

Chapter Notes

Title means - "All in good time"
Fluff and the start of the so-married subplot - and the start of yet another subplot. I'd apologize but hey, there is at least six different stories going on at once okay, the story is hella slow cos I have to cover all bases
Also - there are references to events in world history during this chapter, Will makes a disparaging mark about political events in China, and an OC tries to kick up dirt about Chinese-Japanese relations, they're not necessarily my views they're not even something that I necessarily have any right to speak of, it's just part of plot
Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a string quartet accompanied by two zithers playing in the inner courtyard of the Freer Gallery, small cafe-style tables scattered throughout the canopied space with chairs for the weary, and two long ornate Chinese tables laden with canapés stylishly presented upon jade-colored platters with bouquets of peonies, lit by clusters of paper lanterns that looked like artistic bath bubbles. The fountain in the middle was guzzling merrily, shimmering from orange to red and then blue as the lights embedded in the pool changed, and there was a general air of merriment despite the occasional nip from the chilly December weather that managed to sneak in under the canopy. Everyone was in formal wear while the wait staff waltzed in and out of the crowds, easily picked out with their plain whites and blacks, and security guards in black suits haunted the perimeters and cordoned off doorways.

Will followed Hannibal down the short steps into the courtyard, his hand clutching harder than was probably comfortable on the alpha's arm. The subtle scents of other alpha and omega guests intermingled with the wholesome placid scent of betas, but were quickly drowned out by the flood of details from everything else around him. Hannibal stroked over his knuckles anchoring him without words, and he glanced over, grateful.

It was strange, being dressed up like this; he may have gotten used to giving Hannibal control over his wardrobe out of apathy, but it was challenging being dressed to be seen, and not to mention, to be appreciated. He had frozen at his reflection earlier, stunned to see what was almost a stranger – an attractive omega man in his thirties, clean-shaven, dark-haired, blue-eyed, messy locks somewhat tamed, dressed in a slim navy tuxedo with peaked lapels, wide-eyed and startled as his hands smoothed down his jacket at the buttons, feeling the suppleness of the fabric, nothing like the scratchy polyester tuxedo he'd worn in high school. Hannibal had asked him what he was looking at, bemused at Will's silent astonishment, and skimmed a finger along the fold of Will's collar to make sure that it sat neatly. He hadn't been able to reply, finally understanding, *seeing* that *this* was who Hannibal saw every time he looked at Will.

He was being shown off tonight by the alpha – and he almost didn't mind.

Will reached to loosen his collar but then froze in indecision, afraid he might ruin the bowtie. Then he stared at the plain gold wrapped around his ring finger for probably the sixth or seventh time before putting his hand back down again, taking a deep fortifying gulp of air. Hannibal passed him a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and took a short sip of his own drink before smiling at Will, encouraging. He held the man's gaze as he drank, taking probably a larger gulp than was wise at the beginning of the evening – in his peripheral vision, someone's face lit up at the sight of Hannibal and started to come over – and promptly choked like a kid having his first drink. Hannibal's eyes crinkled at the corners. Will averted his eyes but smiled too, buoyed by the man's ease and good-humor over the hiccup.

"Doctor Lecter," the beta woman, natural blonde ringlets falling about her face like a lion's mane and with almost comically huge eyes, smiled with all her teeth on display, hands clasped before her as though she was going to start jumping any moment now in her glee. "*Oh* you're finally here – and you must be Mister Graham-Lecter – can I just say I am so glad that both of you could make it tonight!"

Will couldn't even dislike her for her high spirits; she was genuinely that excited.

"Good evening, Miss Quinn," Hannibal greeted just as warmly, though in a far calmer manner.

She held up her hand, which bore a ring, flashing another ridiculously bright grin. "It's Mrs. Wright actually – but I haven't changed anything on my correspondence."

"Congratulations." Hannibal took her hand, looking almost fatherly as he made a show of appreciating her diamond ring and wedding band, then shot her a look of mock-disapproval, "Why didn't I know of this? I'll have to send a gift to offer my belated well-wishes."

"Oh, no really, it's alright," She squeezed the alpha's hand briefly – *you sweet man* – before letting go, "We kept it small – we're both *so busy*, it ended up being just us and our families."

Hannibal nodded agreeably like he knew very well – when really, the alpha actually couldn't understand at all how anyone could not desire showing off a successful courtship – and glanced over the other attendees, "Is he here tonight? I must tell the man that he has married a capable young woman, and warn him to remain worthy of you."

Blushing and breaking out into giggles that were more fitting for a preteen, Mrs. Wright née Quinn, positively glowed as she shook her head. "Unfortunately no – he has his own office party tonight."

"Oh?"

"He works in IT," She waved her hand idly, "The company have an event over in Silicon Valley and flew him down for the weekend."

"I'm very sorry to have missed him then," Hannibal glanced at him, prompting Will to smile at the young woman, "Please, pass along our congratulations to him – any man who managed

to win your affections is a very lucky man indeed. And I insist on a gift; it's only proper, but worry not, I shall keep it small."

The blonde beamed, almost permanently red-cheeked now, "Thank you, Doctor Lecter."

"Will," Hannibal slid an arm behind his back; it felt familiar, comforting, "This is Penelope. She is one of the logistics staff for the Smithsonian and was the person who contacted me regarding the gallery's interest in my antique weapon's collection."

"Call me Penny," She shook Will's hand with warmth, "I'm so pleased to meet you, your husband has been so generous with his time and we are very excited to have such valuable pieces made available for research and exhibition."

Will tried to match her enthusiasm but failed miserably, "Pleased to meet you."

She didn't seem bothered, just took a step back and glanced between Hannibal and him, her good-mood unaffected and covering over his feeble response. "You're a beautiful couple, can I just say? I hope I'll be just as happy in ten years time."

Hannibal glanced at him, hand squeezing playfully at his waist, "Yes, I hope you will be as well."

And then before the bands twisting their way around his stomach could tighten any more at the tension, Penelope Wright flounced away, citing that she thought she could see two of the curators, Mister Court and Doctor Sekimoto, and they would so love to finally meet Hannibal face-to-face so be right back. When she was gone, Will took a gulp of champagne, very aware of the alpha standing next to him and how they were practically hip-to-hip.

"She's a lovely young woman," Hannibal told him, breath tickling his ear.

Will tamped down on his shiver and just nodded, resisting the urge to tap his ring against the champagne glass.

It was a big night for them. Though no one said so, Will knew that it was a rather big step down the path he'd been traveling on his rediscovery of who Will Graham-Lecter was; he had accepted the children easily, they were *his* even if he couldn't remember carrying them – but his relationship with Hannibal was...a work-in-progress. In the beginning, things between them had been cordial, sharing the level of intimacy that one might expect between colleagues as Will struggled to incorporate the alpha into his worldview. Now, after all these weeks, he felt comfortable with Hannibal, *so* comfortable that it shook him out of the moment whenever he noticed it. He had asked about the rings earlier at the hotel, knowing that people would be looking – and really the last thing he wanted was to stand out because people were wondering why they *weren't* wearing rings – and to his utter lack of surprise, Hannibal drew them out as if he had been waiting.

The alpha had slipped it on him with little ceremony but Will didn't miss the enlarged pupils, the sense of alpha satisfaction that imbued every glance, smile and touch since. It would have riled him up if he didn't feel a strange tug of pleasure at yet another reminder that Hannibal remained steadfast.

Penelope Wright returned, almost skipping in her pointy heels, with two older betas in plain black formalwear, a man and a woman, who were introduced as Lewis Court and Doctor Naomi Sekimoto. Both were very pleased to meet Hannibal, just as the blonde had predicted, and Will relaxed as the curators visibly curbed from even bothering to shake his hand when Hannibal curled a possessive hand around the nape of his neck as he introduced Will, subtly warning off anyone from making physical contact. The pleasantries quickly turned into a discussion about what they've managed to discover so far in their analysis of the family heirlooms that Hannibal had graciously allowed into their care – it's very dry, though the alpha seemed to follow along just fine. Will didn't bother pretending to pay attention and let his eye wander over the other guests.

Most people whom walked by would at least give Hannibal a glance, and within five minutes, the alpha had garnered several looks of admiration, and aroused the aesthetic appreciation/curiosity of a few bold attendees who stopped by to compliment the man on his outfit. Will knew very little about clothes and cared even less – but even he could tell that the so-dark-it-was-black burgundy tuxedo with standard dress-shirt and charcoal bow-tie was extremely striking. It seemed very traditional at first glance, until the light hit at a certain angle or the alpha moved, managing to twist or ruffle the fabric, and then there was a ripple of color.

"Have you seen them yet?" Lewis Court asked.

"No," Hannibal turned as if to consult with him. Will exhaled softly as he realized what it was: habitual behavior, ingrained, an alpha in mate-appeasement mode. "We only arrived shortly before."

"I think you'll be very pleased with the restoration of the long-saber. The scabbard markings are now much clearer than they were," the curator of Chinese antiquities smiled at Will, following the alpha's gaze. "Shall we?"

They headed for one of two doors that allowed access to the part of the gallery opened specially for the event. There's a decent number of guests inside, but quiet compared to the merry atmosphere in the courtyard – drinks were apparently allowed in, but not food, as several people found out when they were turned away to finish their canapés first. Already there were scaffolds set up in the cordoned-off sections, evidence of the upcoming week-long job ahead to finish refreshing the permanent collections in time for winter break.

Will allowed himself to be led from display to display, enjoying the chance to look and engage in his own way without the pressure of keeping up with the conversation. Apparently a few of the Chinese swords and long-spears in the glass cases were from Hannibal's private collection, heirlooms of his aunt's family; her ancestors had collected them from traders traversing the East China Sea during Japan's long centuries of isolation. Will had heard a little of Hannibal's aunt, just enough to know that she was an omega, beautiful and very cultured, and that Hannibal respected her greatly. However, he'd also gotten the sense that there had been a falling out; since apparently she was still alive, and yet had never bothered to visit, even though Hannibal made sure to send a notice at the birth of each child.

They wandered back outside to enjoy some of the catering (Hannibal deemed it passable) after Penny profusely apologized for not realizing that they must be hungry – actually, Will

was fine, as they'd had dinner beforehand – and they spent at least another half hour speaking to several curators before they're finally left alone. Of course *then*, after Hannibal had selected what he thought they might enjoy from the canapés on offer, Mrs. Joan Mandeville arrived in an expansive wrap of raw silk in silvery-blue, and proceeded to cluck over the two of them – *oh* look at you, Will, you're *gorgeous tonight* darling boy, and *honestly*, Hannibal, why are you hiding this creature away at home, bring him along more often.

"I am afraid that I have very little sway in the matter," the alpha smiled at him. "Perhaps you'll have better luck convincing him."

"Will," Mrs. Mandeville began gravely as though she were imparting instructions of deadly consequences, her fingers (nails forever-painted in classic red) clutching with formidable strength around his hand, "Come to the opera next time with Hannibal – I insist upon it – we'll have supper at *Thoumieux* after."

It was very hard to deny the beta matron anything; he ended up nodding along and being dragged from Hannibal's side to be introduced to her friends, other beta matrons of reputable standing (Will was pretty sure that one of them owned part of a billion-dollar candy bar company) as well as several alphas, male and female, who ran in the same social circles. Some of them were accompanied by their mates, most of whom appeared to know him, by name if not by sight; *all* the alphas greet him with the appropriate respect and distance one should show towards a fellow alpha's mate. It's novel, even *bizarre* – though in a good way – since memories of being twenty-four years young and never being able to walk past an alpha without drawing unwanted attention were still fresh in Will's head.

When he was finally released, Hannibal had already moved onto a deep discussion with some art historian – it was about as esoteric as it sounded. Will shuffled around the food display, uncertain without his anchor, and wondered if it would be too much to ring Alana – for the third time – and check on the children when suddenly, someone tapped him on the shoulder, hard enough that it might be counted as a slap.

Confused, Will spun around.

Kathy Prescott, red-hair curled and resting artfully over a shoulder, in a long black tuxedo blazer and white high-collared shirt, grinned at him. "I cannot believe my blessed eyes, you actually came!"

"K-*Kathy*?" He stammered, shocked.

She laughed, drawing a few looks from nearby guests, "You should see your face."

Will could only imagine what kind of face he must be making – because out of all the scenarios he'd imagined for tonight, this hadn't been one of them.

"What are you doing here?"

The beta propped a hand on her cocked hip, chin tilted up in false grandiosity. "You're not the only one who likes to take in a little culture."

“Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

She shrugged with grin, “I didn’t know I was coming – no *seriously*, I didn’t. It was a last minute thing – my editor backed out; it’s flu season and she’s got three kids under ten, so you can imagine: total mayhem with a domino of bodies lying everywhere crying for mommy. This isn’t my scene, but then I thought why not – work-expensed trip to D.C. with free food, good company, Aaron off having some fun at his best friend’s and out of my hair.”

Will wasn’t sure if he could be considered good company; however he certainly appreciated the amazing stroke of luck that allowed Kathy to be here tonight. But then he tensed, recalling that the last time they’d see each other was when Freddie Lounds was practically calling him unstable to his face.

“I’m glad you took my advice,” she looked him over, beaming, “You look *really* good – not that you aren’t usually but tonight? Extra points, Professor, superb, *magnific*.”

Will wanted to ask her what had happened after he left the two women alone, as much as he didn’t want to. In the end, his attempt to rally his courage fell to the wayside and he forced himself to smile back, to not question why she was still treating him the same.

“Yes well, it was hard to decline when everyone’s advice seemed to be the same. Did you come alone?”

“Nope,” she turned and waved flippantly at the crowd, “Greg’s gone after the food – he’s always after the food – you’ll get to see him later, after he’s had his moment with the food.”

Will scanned the people besieging the canapés and couldn’t quite figure out which of them was Greg Prescott.

“Where’s Hannibal?” She asked, almost rubbing her hands together in excitement. “I want to see him – what are you wearing?” She smoothed a hand over his lapel, “Oh *hello*, very nice – is this bespoke?”

Will looked down at his own outfit and shrugged – it was a tuxedo, and it fitted.

“And you don’t care either, do you?” She remarked, her tone dry enough to wipe one’s hands on.

He chuckled under his breath as she grabbed the nape of her neck in consternation because growling was unladylike and pouting was childish.

“Come on,” Will put down his lukewarm champagne, much more comfortable now with the beta as a buffer between him and the masses, “Hannibal’s over there.”

It took them a few minutes to catch up with the alpha, as he had moved on from where Will had last seen him. However, despite having headed back inside, the scene hadn’t changed: Hannibal was still surrounded by several people, betas mostly, everyone talking in florid terms about weapons used to behead or maim (see the art but not the blood).

“How did you come by such curious pieces?” Someone asked, voice reflecting along the hard planes of the sparse gallery interiors.

Someone else turned and spoke on the alpha’s behalf, giving a quick summary of Hannibal’s family connections that led to his possession of the antiques – a curator, or rather a curator’s assistant going by his age. Will caught a slight tick in Hannibal’s profile, and knew that despite his unwavering cordial smile, the alpha was annoyed.

“I’m very pleased to be getting the opportunity to examine such unusual specimens of Ming metallurgy,” one elderly gentleman spoke up, heavily-accented – Singapore maybe? There was also something British about the man’s harder consonants.

“No offense, Doctor Lecter, but your aunt’s story is hard to believe for me.”

Hannibal shifted to face the beta who had spoken, “It’s what I was told, Mister...?”

“Many precious cultural properties have been stolen from my country in the past hundred years,” the overweight gentleman stated, ignoring Hannibal’s question entirely, and then smiled.

Hannibal smiled back without any discernible shift in expression, polite to the last.

Will felt rage wash over him at the man’s insinuations; that Lady Murasaki's family had obtained the items illegally and that Hannibal knowingly possessed stolen cultural property. This might have been true for some owners of rare Chinese antiquities, but considering the Lecter family’s own black fortunes during the last hundred years that had left them scattered, dispossessed from their heritage by war and politics, he knew that the alpha had checked the legality of the weapons collection passed to him – at least as far as he could with the limited records.

“Keeping in mind what’s happened within your beautiful country since the mid-twentieth century, I dare say *many* of your cultural treasures can only be found in private overseas collections; I believe there was a period wholesale destruction of any cultural heritage that could be traced to *alpha-omega* oppression with the full backing of your government; it was even thought of as therapeutic, a *cleansing* if you will,” Will remarked tartly, banked fury flattening his tone.

They all turned, startled; he quelled the urge to pardon himself and flee, squaring his shoulders purposefully and focusing upon the one person whose opinion he cared for among them. From behind their turned heads, Hannibal’s mouth quirked, holding Will’s gaze with significance – *warmth, mischief, admiration* – before going back to his bland socialite's smile.

“Mrs. Prescott, what a surprise – do excuse me,” he pulled away from the group, his unabashed eagerness for his omega’s company eliciting bemusement from some, and closed the distance between them, his arm sliding around Will’s waist in a practiced move.

“That was rather mean, but thank you,” the alpha whispered into his ear as they headed for the arched doorway leading to the next exhibition hall, then turned his charm onto Kathy.

“I’m pleased but very surprised to see you tonight, Mrs. Prescott, I had no idea you had an interest in Asian antiquities.”

Will averted his eyes, a low bloom of warmth in the pit of his stomach. Kathy chuckled and replied in that usual blunt way of her – oh no, I’ve been sent by work to eat the food and keep abreast of who’s wearing what. He listened with half an ear as Hannibal asked after her son and husband, then complimented the beta on her outfit, asking for the designer’s name while she enthused over his tuxedo – must be custom-order, oh my goodness, surgeon cuffs with antique pips, was that mother-of-pearl, I love it, woven silk?

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Hannibal asked when Kathy left them to track down her husband, tangling their hands together as he tried to catch Will’s eyes.

“It’s an acquired taste,” which he hadn’t yet acquired, “but the company is decent.”

Their eyes met for a second, before he went back to staring at the alpha’s bowtie. Hannibal lifted a hand and cupped the side of Will’s head, hiding the gentling as casual grooming, tucking a stray lock of hair that had escaped from behind the shell of Will’s ear. Turning his head, he gave into the urge to run his nose over the cuff of Hannibal’s jacket.

“We shall leave soon, I promise.”

“No,” he shook his head, “This is your night – it’s been on your calendar forever, don’t mind me.”

Hannibal’s hand cupped the underside of his jaw and flowed down over the length of his shoulder, stroking down his arm until the alpha took his hand again in a tight affirming squeeze.

Another person approached them, clamouring for Hannibal’s attention. Will stifled his chuckle as the alpha’s eyes rolled up in a micro-expression of exasperation before putting on his game-face and turning to face his latest admirer – ah, to be the *belle* of the ball...

Left to his own devices again but in a far better mood, Will sat down on the viewing bench for the Chinese war chariot on display in the middle of room, complete with mannequins of a driver and archer dressed in full battle regalia, their faces contorted in fear and flight as their glass eyes fixed upon their invisible enemies.

“Hello,” the woman sharing the bench said, her voice low and smooth, “Are you an academic, press or a donor?”

Will studied her from the corner of his eyes; alpha female, icy-blonde hair piled artfully atop her head, lips painted a soft blush, plunging neckline, a golden dress that clung to all the right curves, legs-crossed, manicured fingers folded at her knee, pointy metal-tipped heels. She smiled faintly and tipped her head to return his regard, waiting for his answer with all the patience of a saint. Or all the lassitude of a cheetah in wait.

“Uh, neither, I’m the plus one...” he muttered, and then as an afterthought, “You?”

“I’m the moral support,” she admitted, her voice an indolent drawl, “but I’ve been excused for the evening. Do you know much about Chinese war-craft?”

Will shrugged; there was something about her that reminded him of Hannibal, a mannerism of restraint that seemed at odds with the usual intensity associated with alphas. “I read the *Art of War* while I was at the Academy.”

“Airforce?”

He chuckled at the mental image of himself in fatigues and corrected her assumption, “Police.”

“An officer of the law,” she gave him a respectful tip of her head, “Retired though, I assume?”

“Yes,” he felt a flutter of discomfort at the flare of her nostrils – he wondered what she could smell of him; that special fragrance exuded by omegas who had opened themselves up to give life; the expensive scent-free soap provided by the Jefferson Hotel; the cinders left behind by Hannibal’s parting touch.

She returned to staring at the display. “I’ve been informed that it’s essential reading – was it interesting?”

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,” he quoted, and then blinked, startled at how easily the words came to him despite how long it’s been. “It has its moments.”

“Good advice, but I personally prefer this one; keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

Will tried not to be sardonic but he wasn’t sure it worked, “Yeah, that’s from the *Art of War*.”

She smiled in response without taking her eyes off the archer, whose plastic muscles bulged whenever they were glimpsed through the gaps in the traditional armor they’d laid over him. “It seems I’ll have to visit my local bookstore.”

“Unless you have plans to join the military service or go into the cutthroat world of finance, I don’t think you need to worry,” Will wondered if the soldiers were anatomically correct, scarred and callused, the way that a real charioteer and archer serving in the Ming army would have been.

She made a hum of passive agreement. “It’s interesting, don’t you think, the amount and varied ways that people have found to kill each other.”

Will chuckled darkly, “That’s a given, isn’t it? Whenever the human race invents something, the first thing we do is figure out how to turn it into a weapon.”

She turned to look at him; he jerked his gaze to the floor as his common sense caught up with his tongue, “Ah, sorry, never mind.”

“No,” she replied, “I prefer honesty.”

Then you’re in the minority.

“Truth uttered before its time is always dangerous,” he muttered under his breath, the phrase just flying into his head – he tried to remember who had said it or where he had read it, but couldn’t. Instead of being frustrated though, he just felt weary.

“Is that a quote?” She didn’t sound offended.

Will managed a small smile. “Don’t ask me who though.”

She returned his smile but her eyes flicked to the side instead of meeting his gaze, distracted by the entrance of two men, academic going by their dress sense, who spoke passionately in hushed tones, gesticulating the entire time.

“You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself.”

He sighed, “Tonight isn’t for me to enjoy myself.”

“*Ah*,” she picked up the almost-empty flute of champagne by her side, “Yes that’s right – you’re the plus one.”

“I’m the plus one,” he affirmed.

She drained the last of her champagne and set it down with a click on the veneer of the bench. Trying to at least making an effort to be sociable, Will decided that introductions were probably in order at this point:

“Will Graham-Lecter.”

“Bedelia Du Maurier,” She smiled, “This usually goes better if I’m perfectly honest with you; I do know your husband.”

His brow twitched as details began to gather together; her perfectly coiffed hair, the force she exerted upon her outward projection of emotions so that little to nothing slipped out without permission, the business-like manner of her friendliness, the hypnotic cadence of her voice, the way she turned and weighed the conversational ball between her palms before tossing it back...

Will would laugh at the irony if he didn’t just feel tired; shrinks just seemed to pop up around him like a rigged game of whack-a-mole. “A colleague of Hannibal’s?”

“Yes,” her smile was faint – he still got the sense that she knew exactly what he was thinking and was teasing him somehow, “But like you, I’m retired.”

“I’m not actually retired, I mean – I’m not an officer anymore, but I do work,” he said, not sure why he was saying it – except to appease the panic of his twenty-four year old self, who didn’t want to leave her with the impression somehow that he was Hannibal’s dependent, some trophy househusband. Will cleared his throat.

She raised her eyebrows, expressing interest in this line of query and prompting for an elaboration, all without a word. Will wondered how one went about learning such skills – and if he could get lessons somewhere.

“I teach at Quantico, FBI Academy – well, not right now,” He clamped his lips together before he ended up stammering about the circumstances of Junior’s birth, “but yes.”

“You’re a teacher,” Bedelia Du Maurier stated, but Will heard the slight lift at the end, almost as though she wanted say it like a question; “Should I be addressing you as professor then?”

“Not unless I’m required to address you as doctor.”

“To my patients, certainly,” she smiled, but didn’t offer a preference. “Do you believe Sun Tzu could be characterized as proto-Machiavellian?”

He was right; she *was* like Hannibal.

He shook his head, chuckling under his breath. “I’m assuming we’re talking politics? He wrote that the only people who truly understood the *profitable* way to wage war are people who are thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war, and that everyone suffered when the fighting dragged on; that sounds more like being able to see the big picture and having a sense of social responsibility than a supporter of pure instrumentality.”

“The general who wages war better because he cares,” she noted, some blend between casual idleness and genuine interest. “Actually I was thinking of Machiavellianism in terms of psychology.”

Of course she was.

“I was informed earlier that historians now think Sun Tzu was an omega, not an alpha as previously believed. As someone who has read his work, I was wondering if you had any impressions to offer.”

Considering that many of the qualities valued by the ancient Chinese were personality-traits strongly associated with omegas, he wasn’t surprised that someone had eventually pointed out the illogical presumption that Sun Tzu, being a war general of that period, had to be an alpha. “Not a fan of reading with an open mind?”

“I like to be prepared,” she shrugged lethargically, a faint flicker of sharp clavicles rising and falling. “Having a correct frame of reference can be important.”

He hesitated, not sure if they were still having the same conversation. There was a tension in the way she looked at him, like she was examining him for a hint, or a sign. Will hid a frown; “Sun Tzu believed that if you were outmatched in every way, then the best option is to flee.”

“Would an alpha be capable of that?” She asked with a self-deprecating smirk.

He smiled at the subtle dig – that alphas didn’t have the common sense to flee when faced with a foe they couldn’t handle, and thus sowed the seed of their own undoing – and twisted to face the doorway as another group wandered inside. The new intruders somehow managed

to be loud despite keeping their voices to a dull murmur, their asinine commentary drifting over to him despite his best efforts to block it out; he almost wished the pair of arguing academics would come back.

“He also wrote that to win you have to work from the shadows.”

Which wasn’t standard alpha behavior – no, they usually wanted to beat their chests and meet a challenge head-on, preferably while singing about it. Out of the dark triad of narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism, only the last wasn’t associated with alphas.

“That sounds like Machiavellianism to me.”

“Yes, well, he thought winning through a ruse was better than outright battle, especially if this meant not wasting one’s resources.”

“An economist.”

“There’s an economy to war.”

She smiled, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “To not only win, but to win decisively.”

“And to know when to retreat.”

“Live to fight another day?”

“Or pretend until you can get a good shot in.”

Bedelia Du Maurier opened her mouth to reply but then halted, her posture straightening as she stared past him to the doorway. “Hannibal,” she greeted, rising to her feet gracefully like something unfurling in the sun.

Will turned as a shadow fell over him, and took the offered hand with a smile.

“Bedelia,” the alpha greeted warmly, “How have you been? It’s been – what? Over a year I’d say, since we last saw each other.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“What have you been up to?” Hannibal’s arm resettled around Will’s waist, a low hum of possessiveness permeating the air. “I heard from someone you went overseas. France or Italy?”

“Here and there,” the woman gestured vaguely, “but yes, I decided that some travelling was in order.”

“I did always enjoy traveling; clears the mind, puts things into perspective,”

“Quite,” she gave them both a faint smile, “If you’ll excuse me, I should be getting back to my companion.”

Will nodded. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Yes,” Hannibal smiled. “It was lovely to see you again, Bedelia. Maybe you could come for dinner some time; we’d love to have you.”

Speak for yourself, Will thought; his last dinner with multiple psychiatrists at the table was enough trauma to last him for a decade. The alphas stared at one another, smiling carefully, sizing one another up in that way alphas did when they couldn’t decide if someone had done or said something worthy of a disagreement; was Hannibal *jealous*? Will hid his bemusement.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Bedelia Du Maurier gave them both a polite tip of her head in farewell and left through the other doorway, her hips swinging as she strode away with speed and purpose, dress swishing behind her legs like a tail.

In the wake of her departure, Hannibal turned to look at him.

“Shall we go too?”

Will pressed his lips together and stared at the floor, not wanting to seem too eager.

The alpha chuckled and tightened his hold. “I’ll call the car and we’ll make our farewell rounds.”

Despite stopping for several minutes to finally meet Gregory Prescott, Kathy’s wayward husband (beta man with a slightly asymmetrical face – the result of a boating accident when he was fifteen – and greying hair but a honest smile and pleasant manner; Will liked him, but then they shared a common interest in sailing), they managed to get back to the hotel shortly after 11PM, late enough that Will was tired but not too late that he couldn’t send off one last text message to Alana asking how things went at bedtime.

The photo she sent back in response made him smile and he didn’t even notice when Hannibal leaned in to look, their heads touching over the picture of Micah and Elizabeta, who had apparently decided that they’d sleep in Papa and Daddy’s bed tonight for a change, and were tucked up together completely dwarfed by the king-sized bed. She’d also updated them on the separation anxiety situation with Junior – after the initial tantrum, he’d turned to Tomas as Will’s substitute, practically sitting on his brother all evening until his bedtime and was now snoozing away in his crib; Tomas had been, as always, an absolute angel.

Will showered first and ended up in the hotel suite’s lounge with the baby grand as company (seriously *who* in the world needed a piano desperately during their trip to Washington D.C. – Elton John, Will supposed, but *still*) while Hannibal took his shower, tumbler of whiskey in

hand as he flipped through the photo timeline again; Junior's scrunched-up teary face, so deeply betrayed by his apparent abandonment; an hour later, the toddler's intent stare up at Tomas from where he was seated in his brother's lap; Eli's proud smile showing off the gap in her teeth – that wobbly front tooth of hers had finally come out after dinner tonight – and holding up her slightly bloody baby tooth in a tissue, so pleased with herself; and finally, the picture of Micah and Eli making themselves comfy in the master bed.

Hannibal exited the bedroom in his usual bathrobe, still drying his hair. "Will, have you seen my moisturizer?"

He put the phone down, "You mean the elbow cream?"

The alpha gave him a look; Will smiled into his tumbler as he took a sip. It amused him to no end that Hannibal had scaly elbows in winter like a regular person – of course, being Hannibal, he also bought himself some ridiculously expensive cream from New Zealand just for keeping his elbows moisturized.

"Yes," the older man said with a touch of bite, exasperated.

Will nodded to the bedroom door, "Sorry I used it – should be on the ottoman, under my towel."

The alpha disappeared back into the bedroom.

Draining the last of his nightcap, Will grabbed a bottle of water for later before following – and froze in the doorway at the sight of Hannibal's bare back.

Two months, and he had never seen more than the man's forearms and legs, shying away from any situation that might put them together like that; now he couldn't look away. Thoughts of brushing his teeth and cuddling up to his pillow were derailed at the sight of faint but extensive scarring down one side of Hannibal's back. They were odd-looking, almost like normal skin from certain angles yet clearly thinner, more brittle than skin elsewhere on the alpha's back, as if they were scars received in childhood then forcibly stretched during adolescence. Without even thinking about it, Will reached out and touched one, curious.

"How many fights did you get into?"

Hannibal glanced over his shoulder with a droll smile, uncapping his moisturizer, "I was extremely rambunctious as a child."

"I'll say," Will frowned, "do they hurt?"

"No more than they should – they do itch sometimes though."

Will met his gaze. "May I?"

The alpha held out the uncapped flat glass jar. Putting down the water bottle, Will dipped his fingers in and took a generous scoop, smoothing the cloyingly thick cream over the most

obvious scars and working it in with long firm strokes. Hannibal smiled at him over his shoulder.

It took Will a minute to realize what he was doing, the poses they were in – then it hit him like a splash of water: their poses, the act itself, their unwitting mimicry; the ancient Greek marble carvings of Spartan omegas standing at the backs of their alphas, arming them for battle; the medieval illuminations of the alpha knights, being dressed to ride out by their loyal mates; the wartime posters of an omega nursing the wounds of an anonymous alpha soldier, sky-blue uniform soiled with soot and grime. He reasoned to himself that he was just applying moisturizer onto the alpha's back, that there was utterly nothing more to it – except there was.

It seemed a natural progression of things for him to lean forward and cautiously scent Hannibal, press his nose against the side of the alpha's neck. The only response that Hannibal gave was to go still – the type of stillness that enticed something to come closer so as to be ensnared. Will closed his eyes and drew his mouth across the slope of a shoulder.

"I think that's all of it," he murmured, then stepped back.

Hannibal took a deep breath and turned, cupping his jaw and kissing him affectionately on the temple, "Thank you."

Will didn't know who gave the first signal, if it was him or if there was something in the alpha's face but a moment later, they were kissing. There's no grace to it, but it's warm, playful even, and he felt a kick to his stomach, something hot and bubbly when they pull apart.

"I didn't mean to do that," Will mumbled, awkward and yet glad all at once – because it was over now, *done with*, he'd signaled his interest to continue being mated and they could get on with living their lives together, doing whatever it was that mated people do when they had to juggle careers, four children and a pantry in constant need of restocking.

Hannibal gave him a soft smile; "Perhaps you didn't – however I did."

He should be immune by now to the alpha's peculiar charm, but Will still felt his mouth stretching without his permission.

"Bed?" The alpha offered.

He cocked an eyebrow; it was a nice kiss, a *very nice kiss* but that was a bit presumptuous.

Hannibal tilted his head in deference to the skeptical look being leveled at him and wryly added, "To sleep; we have lunch reservations."

He hadn't forgotten – they were to have lunch at *Isshouan*, the alpha's favorite Japanese restaurant; it was their last stop before they headed back to Baltimore.

Sighing, he wrapped his arms around the man's torso, and closed his eyes, nodding in agreement. A hand wrapped securely around the nape of his neck and he melted into it, not

even trying to pretend that he wasn't swayed by this alpha, the mate that some version of him had chosen. When he finally got into bed after taking his turn at the bathroom sink, Will gravitated without hesitation to the middle of the bed and burrowed into the man's back, throwing an arm over Hannibal's waist.

"Goodnight," he murmured, nuzzling against a shoulder.

Hannibal tangled their fingers together over the flat of his belly, "Goodnight, Will," he replied, and turned off the light.

Will startled awake to the shrill ringing and buzzing of a cell phone. Still groggy, he got up on an elbow as Hannibal threw off the blankets and went to grab the phone – his emergency line – from where it was on the sideboard, a little crease of annoyance between his brows. The crease deepened as the alpha checked the caller ID.

"Who is it?" Will asked, voice rough with sleep.

"I don't know – there's no ID," Hannibal frowned as he accepted the call, "Doctor Lecter speaking."

A moment later, he came back to the bed and held out the phone; "It's for you."

Will stopped rubbing his eyes and looked at the phone being held out to him, confused. He took it, uneasy.

"Hello?"

"Mister Graham?" Someone asked, a woman, her voice deeper than most women but not enough to be considered throaty.

He cleared his throat, "Yes?"

"This is Special Agent Gracen of the BAU, I'm so sorry to be bothering you, sir but we believe there's been another victim."

What the hell was she talking about? Will dragged himself out of bed, ignoring the chill of the room as he padded into the bathroom and closed the door, gesturing for Hannibal to go back to sleep. "I'm confused here, why are you calling?"

"Sir?"

"I'm *not* on the Maestro case," he advised the woman sharply, because it was six in the morning and still dark outside; was this what it was like back when he'd been consulting for

Jack Crawford? No wonder he'd gone around the bend.

There was clear hesitation over the phone and his opinion of Agent Gracen went up a tiny notch; she had enough sense to be embarrassed at least, “I know, sir, and I do apologize for calling you at this hour – however, this is not about the Maestro case.”

Will’s annoyance drained away as he frowned, intrigued, “Just get to the point.”

“Yes, sir – an FBI agent is dead, we believe it’s the Butcher.”

He looked up into his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Where?”

Chapter End Notes

This was the hardest part I've written so far - it's very challenging to make the shift in intimacy happen organically in between all the double entendre, cannibalism puns, Bedelia being very mysterious etc. etc.
I had to work to get into her mindset, and hash out the conversation she would have with Will, the rhythm between them, her hidden agenda behind every phrase.
I will comb back over this later for glaring errors soon but now I need to go to bed. Ugh.

Parla bene, ma parla poco

Chapter Summary

Will goes to see the crime scene of the Butcher, only to realize they're being duped.

Chapter Notes

The title - Speak well, but speak little
This is a thoroughly plot-driven chapter. As always, I have no beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a beautiful winter's day, the sun high and bright in all-clear skies, a light breeze ruffling the bare tree branches and casting waves and squiggles upon the pavement. Will stared out the car window, drained despite the fact they'd only driven to Arlington and back – well, and visited a crime scene. His fingers still felt strange from the hours they'd spent inside rubber gloves. Hannibal came to a stop at the red lights, blinkers on to turn right. His hands fidgeted in his lap.

"I'm sorry," he said in the silence.

"It's alright, Will."

No, it really wasn't; Will felt a swell of guilt within him, though his study of Hannibal's profile for a lie showed that the man really, *really* didn't mind. That just made him feel worse though.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"It's work, Will. Just as you have made sacrifices for me, I am able to wake up a little earlier than planned to drive you where you need to be," Hannibal shot him a warm smile before returning his attention to the road, making the right turn. "I thought it was educational."

Will snorted at that. Yeah, blood and guts everywhere and lab techs crawling over everything; *educational*.

"You didn't have to drive me, you know, they could have sent someone to pick me up," he muttered, knowing that he was just repeating what had already been said but unable to help himself.

“And let you go on your own?” the alpha licked his lips, consternation flickering over his face as his hands tightened on the steering wheel. “I wouldn’t have been able to go back to sleep anyway, knowing where you were.”

I feel very protective of you...

Will smiled despite his dour mood. Their eyes met briefly.

“So,” Hannibal began, casual tone belying the subject matter, “the Butcher is back.”

“Trust me,” Will grimaced because, *no*, “It’s *not* the Butcher.”

He would *know* if it was the Butcher; he’d made it a *point* to focus on getting to know the Butcher when going through all the files that Beverly had sent him. At this point, he knew as much as the FBI knew about the serial killer, as well as extrapolated a few of his own theories based on evidence and half-legible treatises in his personal notebooks. This dead FBI 'agent'? He might have been killed with a bullet through the throat, cut open and left spread-eagle in a display like the Butcher’s other victims but it was *not* the Butcher.

Hannibal threw him a curious glance, “If it’s not the Butcher, then who is it?”

Will stared stoically out the window at the passing scenery.

Special Agent Rebekah Gracen had been there to greet them at the front of the impersonal apartment building where the crime scene was, apologising once-again for the interruption to their weekend and giving them a run-down of the situation: Timothy Andersen, male beta, forty-seven years of age, FBI archives department employee with a specialization in forensic psychology, currently separated from his wife though apparently they were working on it (and it was going well too), no children, no pets, no debts to speak of, and very much dead, with his eyeballs and right-thumb removed.

Will had been surprised to know what had tipped-off the FBI regarding the body-drop; Andersen’s eyeballs left on ice, sitting prettily atop of the Academy sign within the grounds itself, after the deceased’s severed-thumb had been used to enter through the loading-dock's solid steel doors – automated and watched 24/7 via CCTV (there had still been blood on the pad when investigators had managed to backtrack the unsub’s movements) and unmanned due to the low-risk. Apparently there had been a few five-second drops in the recording for that particular entrance last night – just enough for someone to slip in, cut the cord which automated the gates so that they didn’t open all the way, pull the solid gates shut and then exit again later – all overlooked as general interference.

Will had looked over the crime scene, letting the various crime scene specialists run him through their observations and adding his own queries into the mix to validate, or rather invalidate, his own burgeoning formulations. Hannibal, despite being allowed into the crime scene itself, was not included in any of the discussions; Agent Gracen had been decent enough to make sure everyone knew that the alpha was welcome to stick around and listen in, since he did still have his clearance as an approved FBI consultant, but it was clear that he was the plus one this time around.

It had been a waste of time in the end – because Will was certain: it wasn't the Butcher.

"Will," Hannibal began quietly, breathing in as if he was bracing himself for a backlash, "The deceased was an employee of the FBI, murdered in his own home and then displayed – I assume there was mutilation and a surgical trophy taken?"

Will shook his head and rubbed his brow, because the alpha was focusing on all the wrong things like everyone else; "The victim was a desk jockey slash forensic psychologist in his forties kept on the archiving staff. The Butcher takes *graduates* – they're almost always alphas, or if they are betas, they're ex-military or similar aiming for a placement in the field, their psych profiles closer to the alpha-standard ranges, but this guy? He's a beta, and he used to work for a *college*, he doesn't have a gun license – he was never even really an agent, he's *support* staff. It's like the Butcher going after the guy who mops the floors at Quantico – it's shoddy it's- it's *ridiculous*, it's not his style."

"The Butcher's last victim was not a graduate," the alpha pointed out.

He shook his head, voice bitter as he replied; "That wasn't an anomaly – that was the Butcher rubbing the FBI's face in their mistake. Making the one person who wanted to make everything go away by putting me away-"

Will sucked in a shaky breath, unable to mask entirely his reaction to talking about how certain elements within the FBI had actually wanted to convict and sentence him anyway despite the growing evidence that the Butcher was still at large, just so they wouldn't have to face their monumental fuck-up, "-look into his real face, fully-aware of herself being slowly murdered, while the whole time she's been arguing that the Butcher has been caught? That's *pure irony*. She wasn't a change in victimology – she was the end of a chapter, his *cherry* on top."

In the strange silence of the car, Will exhaled softly, almost collapsing in on himself as the pressure that had been brewing inside all came out in the after-echo of his words. He hadn't even noticed raising his voice; Will pinched the bridge of his nose and didn't react when the alpha placed a soothing hand on his knee, squeezing it in comfort before going back to the wheel. The car slowed to a crawl at another set of lights.

"And the mutilation?"

"You mean the slashed arms?"

Hannibal cocked his head to the side, "The victim's throat wasn't cut open?"

"Oh it was cut alright – like, *wide* open – the victim was wearing a Columbian neck-tie."

The alpha's brows furrowed, "His tongue was pulled out through his throat?"

Will rubbed his sore eyes and propped his head up against the passenger side window. "Yes, and his eyeballs were *gouged* out – with the thumbs."

There was that little sound again, the alpha's wetting his lips and carefully measuring his words. "I believe you've come across that before, in another case you worked on."

Will sighed tiredly into his hands, "Yeah, Beverly sent me that one; the Abel Gideon fiasco – I can't believe they haven't fired that guy."

"Doctor Chilton?" Hannibal smiled faintly, bemused by Will's ire, and gave a tiny shrug, "I believe the Board felt that it would have added insult to injury if they requested his removal, considering what ended up removed as an indirect result of his mismanagement."

Will forced down an inappropriate chuckle.

"There is *that*;" He drawled, "Nothing more inspiring that losing a kidney to make you reassess your mental hospital's security protocols."

Somewhere in the recesses of his head, a tiny voice whispered that those security protocols were enforced upon him for the weeks he'd been forced to call the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane home; the same protocols that saw him humiliated and violated via having his clothes cut piece by piece off him, kept in isolation, drugged into docility.

Hannibal's eyes crinkled at the corners and they drove for several minutes in silence before pulling up in front of an refurbished industrial building, in a spot that was marked '*RESERVED PARKING – Isshouan*.'

The alpha switched off the engines, and turned to look at him. "Were the kidneys missing from our unfortunate FBI employee?"

"No, the heart was taken."

"Just like all the other Butcher victims," Hannibal remarked, not as a refutation but simply a statement of fact.

"*Not* like the other Butcher victims," Will sighed, head tipped back against his seat. It was only noon, and they were still on time for their lunch reservation, but he felt so mentally exhausted that he wasn't sure he could even enjoy it. "His heart was taken but it wasn't removed in the *right* way."

"What is the wrong way?"

Will took an exasperated breath and gestured expansively – because *surely* it was obvious, *everything that was wrong* with Timothy Andersen's murder to make it *not* the Butcher. "It was postmortem, there was *way* too much tissue damage; whoever spread the guy's ribs," he chuckled darkly, "They didn't use a spreader – they used their *hands*. The Butcher on the other hand, he *loves* his tools – his displays are littered with evidence of everything from standard household wrenches to antique skull saws. Why the hell would he use his *hands* when he can use a *tool*?"

"Someone strong then."

“Have to be, the way they manipulated the victim’s body, it’s...” Will clamped down on the word ‘intimate,’ taking a deep breath instead to give himself time to pick another word, “*practiced*, a hospital worker, sanatorium staff, or a mortuary assistant or someone used to dealing with bodies as a profession but not a surgeon.”

Hannibal tilted his head, “Why not a surgeon?”

“The cuts are wrong – they didn’t use scalpels either, more like...” He licked his lips, his synapses firing at a dozen cracks per second – he closed his eyes for moment to contain it all; at the back of his mind, he wondered if they were going to be late for their lunch after all, if they kept talking that was.

“If we go with the prelim forensics, it was more like a really sharp cleaver. The Butcher doesn’t use knives or anything classed as a knife – he uses *tools*. This killer used a knife, more or less, he used it well but the fact that he used one, when in all other seventeen homicides confirmed as Butcher-kills, not a single wound or cut could be attributed to a knife *except* for the surgical trophy?” Will chuckled without humor, “There is *no reason* for the Butcher to change his MO now, not to something so *stereotypical* as a *cleaver* – ergo, *not* the Butcher.”

There was a short silence.

“The FBI is looking for a butcher then.”

He threw the alpha a deeply unimpressed look; Hannibal raised a hand in a gesture of surrender.

“Don’t speak like that when we’re at a crime scene.”

The alpha smirked at him, “I only speak like that to you.”

Will pressed his lips together to silence his chuckle but only managed to dampen it down to a wry smile. Hannibal got out of the car and before Will had even finished undoing his belt, was on his side opening the door for him with a little flourish. He gave the alpha a sardonic huff.

“I can get the door.”

“You could, but then I couldn’t do this.”

It wasn’t entirely surprising when Hannibal wrapped an arm around him and pressed their mouths together but Will still gave a little start. It’s only a short kiss though, something in a similar vein as last night but more reassuring that sensual. When they pull apart, Will almost sagged into the embrace, his chin propped on the alpha’s shoulder and his arms firmly locked around the man’s ribs.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed. Because even if Hannibal was completely okay with everything, he wasn’t.

They were supposed to have slept in this morning – which was impossible at home, even on weekends, not with Micah diving on top of Will's head to wake Daddy up for breakfast and Junior needing attention lest he actually climb out of his crib like he kept threatening to do – and had a simple breakfast before taking coffee outside, taken a stroll around the Lincoln memorial then shown up early for their lunch reservations so Hannibal could spend some time with his fellow gourmand, Chiyo Maebara, owner and chef de cuisine of *Isshouan*, before the restaurant opened for lunch. Instead they'd been dragged up at an unholy hour, forced to packed in a hurry so they could drive out to the crime scene – which was a bust as far as he was concerned – and rush back for lunch with no time for socializing.

"There is nothing to apologize for," Hannibal murmured, nosing against the shell of his ear. "You're not the only one who has been called away at an early hour – do you remember what happened with Mrs. Wilkes?"

Will nodded and exhaled, closing his eyes as a hand cupped the base of his skull, fingers running through his hair. "Not the same."

"No?" Hannibal scoffed, "It was at 1AM on a Saturday."

"Life or death emergency," Will murmured.

"*According to her*," the alpha muttered, under his breath but obviously to be heard.

Will pulled away and levelled a look of mock-admonishment at the older man, "Do you discuss all your patients like this, Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal reeled him back into an embrace, and whispered almost indulgently, "I only speak like that to *you*."

He barely muffled his little moan against the alpha's shoulder because really, he walked into that one. Hannibal chuckled, so ridiculously pleased with his little witticism, and pressed a fond kiss into his hair; "What happened this morning, Will, on the scale of disasters that have been known to occur, it was a mere trifle. Your guilty is unnecessary."

He nodded reluctantly.

"Let us enjoy our meal and we can talk about it some more later."

Will opened his mouth to protest – they didn't need to talk about it *at all!* But then the alpha gave him a quick peck, nothing more than a soft touch of mouths; it completely derailed his thoughts.

"I am a *certified* psychiatrist," Hannibal stated, a touch of gentle reproach in his voice, "and I have been consulted on a number of cases in the past, at the request of the FBI and local police – nothing we speak of or *you* can think of will shock me, Will."

He regarded the face of the alpha, studying the wrinkles at the corner of Hannibal's eyes, his not-entirely straight nose, his stark cheekbones, those lips. He didn't know what he was looking for – if the man was serious Will supposed, or if he was just saying that. Though to

be perfectly honest, Will didn't even know if he understood what he *did* see – *such admiration, such adoration, such awe* – when he stared into those soft brown eyes. Finally he nodded, and sighing, buried his face into the crook of his mate's neck.

"Okay," he conceded, "Okay."

Pressing a kiss to Junior's forehead, Will crept from the bedroom as quietly as he could, glad that everyone had gone down tonight without much fuss. Going down stairs, he finished unpacking the dishwasher of the last bits and pieces from their Christmas feast and switched on the kettle for tea. It took him a minute to find the right tin among the dozen or so different tea boxes that they kept – Will shook the earl grey tin, Tomas' favorite, to check if they needed to buy more – and soon, he was leaving with a tray of tea and two cups.

The lead-up to Christmas had been quiet. Well, as quietly as it could be with four children. Except for several emails from Ed Moses, and an official request from Agent Gracen for Will to consult on the reopened Butcher/Not Butcher case – which he still hadn't answered yet – even the agency appeared to have wound down for the holidays.

Instead of a lunch, the Lecter household held a Christmas Eve dinner, the way it was done in Europe; that was new as Will usually had the big meal on the day itself, not that he celebrated Christmas much. They had cooked together – well, Hannibal cooked with Tomas, Eli and Micah as sous chefs, while Will kept Junior entertained and watched the show from the armchair in the corner of the kitchen with the dogs at his feet – and had eaten the sumptuous seafood-oriented dinner by candlelight with appropriately-themed classical music playing. Micah managed an entire meal without assistance, which was a huge deal as he was dressed in his favorite dinner jacket tonight (it was identical to one Will had in his wardrobe) and would have been very upset if he had gotten it dirty, and Eli lost another of her baby teeth, and then there were presents.

Hannibal already had the gifts picked out long-before the Christmas decorations had even gone up in the stores but Will had decided on a spur of the moment that granting a wish would be his contribution, still in good spirits after receiving confirmation he had permission to drive again within reason; and thus they were to spend the rest of winter break at the cabin.

Elizabeta had been thrilled of course, leaping on top of Daddy and then Papa to show her love in an instant explosion of knees and elbows and profuse joy, and immediately started planning her riding outfits, with Micah getting excited in response to the announcement that there were 'dress-ups' in his future; Hannibal Junior couldn't care less and kept plucking all the tree ornaments he could reach while his elder siblings carried on, bringing each bauble over to hand to Will or Hannibal and smiling proudly at the growing pile of tree decorations on his parents' laps; Tomas just smiled and asked if he could bring his best friend Evan along, since last summer, he'd spent a week with Evan's family at their cabin on the coast.

Rounding the stairs to head up to the third-level, Will paused at the light coming from Tomas' room. A quick peek though showed the boy already tucked in, reading a book with drowsy eyes. He smiled and continued his journey upstairs.

Hannibal looked up from where he was running a lint-roller over the leg of his pants – Will mentally sighed at his alpha's fussiness – and smiled before going back to cleaning off the dog hairs.

"You're earlier than I expected."

Will poured tea for two, left the tray next to Hannibal on the ottoman for easy-reach, and sank down in one of the armchairs in front of gas-heated fireplace with his own mug. "I think we wore them out."

Hannibal shot him a wry look, "I believe you mean they wore themselves out."

Will hid a smile into his teacup.

The alpha finished up with the pants and set them aside, neatly-folded, before reaching for the tea.

"I got an email from Agent Gracen."

Hannibal turned to him, face showing calm polite interest – there's no judgment, not a single hint of it, but Will still averted his eyes.

"Not Agent Moses?"

"He's emailed me as well."

"Should I be jealous?" Hannibal gave him a pointed look, "No one has emailed me."

Will rolled his eyes at the alpha, who chuckled and went back to drinking his tea.

"She wants me to come in, *officially* consult on this Butcher/Not Butcher case. Apparently there was another body drop on the twenty-second – there's a media-blackout on the story," Will would love to know how they managed that, "But it's gotten the Director worried."

"I'm not surprised," Hannibal exhaled, tea set aside for the moment, "It's difficult to reassure the public that they're in good hands when the FBI cannot even assure the safety of their own people."

As if they could in the first place, Will thought darkly.

"When are you expected?"

"I'm not going."

"*Will*," Hannibal said in that tone of voice he had, the one that said – *Will, why are you so obstinate and why do I put up with it* – with all the wry-affection and fond-exasperation that

was reserved solely for his mate.

“We’re *going on vacation*,” he stated flatly, and then when Hannibal continued to give him that look, he ran a hand through his hair and got up to assuage the conflicting thoughts that ran through his mind, “I’m not changing our plans.”

“The children won’t mind.”

“Yes but *I mind*,” he said sharply, because *why* wasn’t the alpha making it easier for him; why wasn’t Hannibal nodding along and saying, *yes dear*, that’s the correct decision, let *me* talk to the FBI for you and impress upon them *the importance of leaving Will the hell alone* during the holidays.

The alpha sighed with good-humor, “Will, what do you think will happen when we arrive at the cabin?”

He shrugged. Lunch, he assumed, though since they wouldn’t have supplies at the cabin, they were probably going to stop in at Middleburg for food and some basic groceries. Going for a walk with the dogs was probably next on the list, since they’ll need their legs stretched. Then it was just a matter of getting settled in.

Hannibal gave him a maddening smile and patted the spot next to him. Will went, almost sulkily but relaxed into the arm thrown around his shoulders.

“As soon as we arrive,” the alpha told him matter-of-factly, “Tomas will want to bring Evan to Mrs. MacDonald’s house – which she will welcome with open arms, for it was no small exaggeration when I told you that she wants to adopt him. Eli will call upon our neighbors, the Baxters, and ensconce herself firmly in their stables to play with the horses. Both will quite likely ignore us happily for at least two days.”

He stared down at his fidgeting hands, the tide of his thoughts turning this way and that way.

“It is no trial for the rest of us to make a trip to Quantico,” Hannibal shrugged lightly, “Micah and Junior enjoy riding in the car and I’m certain I can find something to occupy myself with; there’s several well-stocked supermarkets in the area, and we do need food for our stay.”

Will exhaled heavily. “So you’re saying I should go?”

Hannibal wrapped his other arm around him too and kissed him firmly on the temple. “You could have hidden Agent Gracen’s request from me, or immediately declined – that you’ve bothered to tell me about it, shows that you’re at least a little curious.”

Will sighed because yeah, *this* was what one got when they mated with a psychiatrist – he couldn’t even accuse the man of psychoanalysing him, as this could be put down as one partner’s insight into the other when two people had been together as long as thirteen years. He slowly nodded.

“I guess I’ll tell Agent Gracen to expect me.”

“If it will put your mind at ease and allow you to actually enjoy the rest of winter break, then yes.” The alpha pressed one more kiss to his temple before getting up for the bathroom to prepare for bed, leaving him with the final decision.

“Will, hey,” Beverly greeted as soon as he’d passed security check, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed despite the faint smudges of grey beneath her eyes. *Good* Christmas, Will surmised – and *lots* of nephews and nieces, he gathered from the bit of dried spray-on snow still clinging to the left cuff of her jeans and her multi-colored fingernails. Her hair was tied up and she was already in lab-whites. He nodded back a greeting.

“Merry Christmas,” he offered.

“You too,” she smiled, arms-crossed. “I was pretty surprised when they told me you were coming in today.”

He shrugged as he looped the strap of his satchel back over his head, “Yeah well, it’s hard to enjoy winter break when half the FBI seems determined to email you to death.”

He hadn’t even told Hannibal about the friendly-fishing emails from Sanchez, the Academy director, and the query from HR to discuss his return-to-work options.

“That’s a *new* cause of death; do share.”

He allowed himself a small smile at her casual good-humor. She grinned back.

“Come on then,” she turned on her heels, “Rob is waiting for us.”

Will blinked at that and quickly followed the alpha female to the empty staircase, which they took to the labs on the second floor. There was only two labs with lights on, he noticed, which was unsurprising considering the time of year. “Rob as in Robert Papparella? What happened to Agent Gracen?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, “He’s a stand-in for Gracen – they’re all part of Ed’s team who are on staggered leave, and she’s not on break but Ed is, and so she’s gone to stand-in for him on the Maestro case.”

Will paused mid-step, “There’s been another victim.”

Beverly Katz spun around to face him, “You on that case?”

He shrugged, “Not officially.”

She gave him a wry look and held the lab doors open for him, “Don’t say you heard it from me but yeah, so she’s off in North Bethesda keeping things under control.”

Will didn’t envy Agent Gracen and though it was a little bit awful, he was glad that she wasn’t going to be hovering around today; he didn’t know what sort of stories she had heard but there was a fascinated wariness to the way she spoke and dealt with him. Compared to that, he'd pick the much more easy-going Rob Papparella any day, whose earnest friendliness and teasing manner made him think of Miss Delia. Sadly, the man probably was here today because he didn’t have anywhere else to go. According to the FBI portal bio, Robert Papparella was divorced and had no living children, and since he was the youngest of five, his siblings were all likely to have passed on already, and his parents long-deceased. Will imagined that his nephews and nieces had issued invitations, probably genuine ones too – but the ex-agent probably couldn’t be bothered at his age to travel to Long Island to spend the holidays with people who might have been related by blood, but were essentially strangers.

“Mister Graham,” Papparella greeted upon them rounding the corner into what appeared to be a crossover space between a lab and a morgue.

“Agent Papparella,” he smiled.

“Temporarily,” the elder man tapped his nose, “Don’t let the Director know though – Ed’s only deputized me for the afternoon.”

In the background, Beverly wheeled the second corpse to sit next to the first one and unveiled both, effectively putting an end to the pleasantries. “Gentlemen, meet Terri Gradowski, previously of the FBI Requisitions office and the Butcher’s other victim of 2015.”

Will exhaled as he made his way over, “As I’ve stated in multiple emails, this isn’t the Butcher.”

“Oh I agree with you, technically,” Beverly pulled out a file from a trundle trolley next to her and spread out several photos from previous Butcher-confirmed kills on the free metal counter next to the corpses. “But there’s a lot of similarities, too many.”

“There aren’t enough,” He told her, moving the pictures around into chronological order without even thinking about it. If either of them thought this was odd, no one said anything.

“Gracen passed me a copy of your email to her,” the beta told him, joining him to peruse the photos, “I understand where you’re coming from but wouldn’t it be possible for the Butcher to change his MO? It does happen from time to time in cases like these, where the unsub uses up the so-called *full repertoire* of their skills; after so many years of the same thing, sometimes a little experimentation is in order.”

“Except the Butcher never stayed the same – he went from killing only one victim to going on a free-for-all and then going back to singular kills, and then went on a sabbatical. He’s changed *how* he mutilates but never *why* – look at this,” Will nodded to the mess of half-frozen flesh, marrow and bone that was the late Gradowski’s ribs. “This *isn’t* a shaming – this is *debauchery, revelry,* look at the blood.”

Papparella frowned down at the crime scene photos, “The blood spray was excessive in Gradowski’s case – if she wasn’t shot with near surgical precision, I might even have classed it as devolving MO; he must have left soaking in blood though.”

Beverly sighed, “You’d think – but no, we found clothes soaking in lye in the crock pot on the stove, they’re too big to belong to the victim so we’re assuming they belonged to her killer.”

That was new.

“Sodium hydroxide; used to dissolve human remains, and readily available as a household cleaning product,” Papparella recited distantly, more to himself than the room.

The killer probably didn’t even have to bring his own supply.

Will ran a hand through his hair, “They were wearing multiple layers or something, which is easy to do in winter, and just threw off the blood-stained clothes. The Butcher doesn’t do that – he brings his own gear, he leaves with his own gear. He’s never left a single piece of evidence behind.”

“Any DNA evidence on the clothes is destroyed though.”

“You’d think,” he exhaled, “but we’ll find something – because this *isn’t* the Butcher. This is an admirer, not a sycophant but someone who wants to know the Butcher in the way an apprentice courts a master...”

Will’s brow furrowed as disparate details came together in his mind, “I think the killer *does* know the Butcher – I think this is...gesture of *friendship* or something, like when someone recommends a diner and you try it out, so you can get back to them. In this case, the unsub went ahead and tried out his *friend’s* hobby, to see if he’d like it too. Not the killing – he’s too good at this for Andersen to be his first – but he’s never done it this way...”

When he snapped out of his thoughts, slightly embarrassed, Beverly was just nodding along, and he relaxed despite the disconcerted curiosity that Papparella was attempting to hide.

The discussion that followed was quick and furious, with Will conceding on the undeniable similarities that Beverly pointed out but also stubbornly defending his view that this was not the Butcher; at least *not* the Butcher of the Academy kills. He’d never profiled the Butcher as having a partner – not that this unsub qualified anyway – but there was *something* there, some connection between the two killers.

Papparella held up a hand, his bushy-brows tangled in deep thought, “There’s some similarities here to a case in your syllabus – it was at the beginning of the semester so the details escape me but...I believe it was a couple, the Marlows.”

Beverly tilted her head, thoughtful and then slowly nodded, “I think I remember that one – it was originally an Organized Crimes case because they thought it might have been a hit, but then got transferred to the BAU once they cleared the Marlows of mob connections.”

“Right,” the beta confirmed, “They were shot through the neck weren’t they?”

Already, the forensic investigator had her tablet in front of her and was quickly flicking through file names. “I think... Here we go – Thomas and Theresa Marlow; he was shot through the carotid and jugular, instant death; she was shot through the spine, paralyzed, and ended up bleeding out.”

“*Yes*,” Papparella clicked his fingers, “They were shot with near-surgical precision. What did your profile say again, Will – *oh yes*, the unsub wanted Mrs. Marlow to feel the pain and not be able to do anything about it, he wanted her to be helpless and to die that way.”

Did he write that?

Will took the offered tablet and quickly flipped through the files to find what he wanted; scene analysis, official autopsy and home security report. He was surprised to see his own name stamped across a preliminary write-up and the post-case profile. He read as quickly as he could, humming his agreement when Beverly suggested they break for coffee; he absentmindedly followed the two out of the labs for the break room, completely absorbed in the file.

“This is our guy,” he declared upon finishing, “Whoever killed the Marlows, he’s playing at being the Butcher – and he obviously still prefers names beginning with T, he’s an alpha who was brought up as a beta, definitely lower-end health worker, probably not as a career - I was wrong there – the job’s just something to tie him over while he’s getting his real credentials.”

Both alpha female and male beta stared at him when he put down the tablet, wearing expressions between good-humored vexation and unnerved fascination. Will rubbed at his forehead and exhaled tersely; he was starting to get a headache.

“I’m not even going to ask, explain it later – *slowly* – when my brain’s back online,” Beverly grinned wryly into her coffee cup, and nudged a steaming cup that he hadn’t even noticed on the table towards him. “Take a break, genius.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, trying to quiet his mind by focusing upon the earworm he’d developed over the incessant Strauss playlist that Hannibal liked when he was cooking. Will ended up grimacing over the taste of the coffee, having grown used to the amazing coffee that the alpha made. He didn’t miss the thoughtful glances that Robert Papparella shot him, but was grateful when the man chose not to make a point of asking him about his *associations*.

“It’s a big drive, you coming down from Baltimore.”

“I did it when I was working,” he muttered, then forced himself to put down the horrible coffee no matter how much his instincts said he needed it, riffling instead through his satchel for the snacks he kept on hand for the kids. He found a packet of organic peanuts and a fruit muesli bar. He ate the bar and tucked the peanuts back into his bag for later. “We’re in Loudoun County for the winter break, might as well drop by.”

He actually couldn’t figure out how he’d managed the drive from Baltimore to Quantico and then back again three-times a week back when he'd been working.

“That’s like an hour away.”

“Sorry to hear we’ve pulled you away from your vacation,” Robert Papparella told him gently.

Will nodded vaguely as he rubbed his temples and opened his bottle of water, gulping down a few sips.

Across from him, Beverly took another sip of her coffee, “Yeah sorry. Though I’m actually glad Ed called me – I loved having a big family growing up, but having three siblings is different from dealing with three siblings plus their partners and the seven nephews and nieces they’ve decided to gift me with. It was great the first two days, but *yeah*, it was either this or spending the day with a bottle of Tequila. What did you do for Christmas?”

He glanced up, ready to mutter an answer just to seem like he was responding before realizing that she was talking to Papparella.

Despite his fears that the older man would be forced to admit his lack of a family, the beta grinned and admitted that he spent it in Virginia Beach with Ed Moses’ family – that both he and Gracen were guests for the holiday season. Before he could tell them anymore, his phone began to ring and he excused himself to take the call.

When he didn’t return after five minutes, they decided to head for Archives, to see what else could be dug up about the Marlows and similar homicides.

“About the Maestro case – I never heard back about what happened with Tobias Budge.”

“I *knew* that was your suggestion,” Beverly led him across another long glass-lined walkway. Down below, a security patrol car slowly drifted through the lanes of surrounding the Academy buildings. “He was questioned. Personally, I think he’s our perp, but the guy’s clean as a whistle; no priors, not even a parking ticket, no history of antisocial behavior according to anyone who knows him; if I went off his background check I’d think he was a stand-up guy.”

“But?” Will prompted.

“But face-to-face, the guy’s just a *little* off somehow – don’t ask me how.”

He agreed with the assessment; “And he’s got the technical expertise.”

“Which doesn’t mean as much these days when everyone’s got Google on their phone.”

There was that; what was his phone going to be capable of next, he wondered wryly.

“His alibi is wobbly, but we have nothing concrete either, and a profile is only so good as the evidence to back it up.”

Will nodded, conceding to her point.

“He’s got good catgut though, imported from Italy apparently – *what*?” Beverly cocked an eyebrow in response to the grin he shot her, “I used to play the violin.”

“I heard Budge made the catgut himself.”

“Well, that’s an extra layer of creepy – and *suspicious*,” Beverly frowned, “since it didn’t come up when Ed spoke to him and he was pretty forthcoming with everything else. You *know him*?”

“He’s the only luthier in Baltimore;” Will pointed out, and then in response to her quizzical look, “He’s restoring this old cello we bought for Tomas.”

“I didn’t know you knew him personally.”

“Barely – I met him, *once*,” Will admitted, casting his mind back to the very brief stop in *Chordophone* almost a month prior. “I’m surprised you didn’t hold him.”

“Oh *trust* me,” Beverly sped up the last few strides and pulled the door to Archives open for him. “Ed tried but some fancy lawyer came and got him out.”

“And now you’ve got another body,” he nodded a greeting to the sleepy front-desk clerk who glanced over; the man lost interest in them after responding to Beverly’s friendly wave, obviously recognizing her.

“Yeah but the lawyer’s right – it’s circumstantial.”

“Did you put a patrol on him?”

“Yup,” Beverly sighed and leaned in to login to one of the computers before gesturing for him to take the seat, “The cops reported that he went to a friend’s place for a few days, and pretty much just went from his store to his friend’s – not that they were watching for more than three days before they were reassigned due to low staff over the holidays.”

“So he’s not a suspect?”

“Oh he’s a suspect alright,” Beverly leaned over and took the mouse, clicking him into the relevant database. “We’ve got a direct line on the street cams that watch his shop. Having said that though, do you know how easy it is to buy luthier tools online? Most of it is for making your own guitar but there’s definite crossover – it’s not a stretch to sprinkle in some rudimentary knowledge about making catgut string and *presto*, sociopath making human cellos.”

Will took over from Beverly and started looking through the results of her search for cold cases with similar MO. “No other suspects?”

Beverly sat down at a nearby computer and started her own search. “Besides Budge? *Way too many*; I didn’t know we had that many music organizations in Baltimore – plus it’s all very incestuous.”

Will cracked a grin at her description of Baltimore's cultural elite, and clicked into a file about a double-homicide from three years ago.

"I'd *love* to put you into a room with Budge," the alpha female drawled absentmindedly, already focused upon her own computer screen. She paused in her reading and gave him a solemn stare, "Will, if you know something, don't keep it quiet – we can work out whether it's valid or just you jumping to conclusions, but let us know, okay?"

He nodded vaguely.

Beverly went back to her screen, "Do you think you'll see him again?"

"Budge?" Will took a deep breath, "Probably."

The man still had Tomas' cello and was intimately involved in various aspects of the Youth Symphony and a primary supplier of catgut to the strings section of the Metropolitan. It's almost inevitable.

She nodded, "Keep an eye on him."

That went without saying; Will wasn't one to fling around any false accusations but he was going to be attending every single one of Tomas' rehearsals from now on, just in case.

"Okay, this is ridiculous; it might be better if I just download the files for you," Beverly rolled her shoulders and withdrew a USB from her lab coat pocket, "Gracen will be back with a new body soon and your ride will be here in thirty so we better hurry."

Will checked his wrist watch and blinked in surprise at how much time had passed. "Yeah, that's a good idea, thanks."

The door to the bathroom swung open behind him and closed gently. Rather than footsteps though, there was just a tense silence. Will glanced up from where he was washing his hands and almost groaned at who was in the mirror. Jack Crawford gave him an unfathomable look, hands tucked into his pant-pockets in a pretense of ease.

"Hello Will."

He took a deep breath and pointedly went back to washing his hands, "Hello Agent Crawford."

It's not what the man was expecting – he caught the slight pause out of the corner of his eye - which begged the question: what had the man expected?

“Nice to see you around again.”

“It’s just for today,” he didn’t mention that he’d just finished a meeting with Sanchez, a HR rep, Alana and the lawyer that Hannibal insisted he bring with him, where they’d made tentative plans for him to return to work part-time after spring break, and that he was going to continue offering his assistance with any cases related to the Butcher/not-Butcher situation.

“Well, even if it’s just for today, it’s still good to see you back at Quantico.”

Will turned off the tap and walked to the towel dispenser furthest from the door. “Did you want something, Agent Crawford?”

The alpha smiled, almost affable as he gestured, “I like the smell of urinal cake.”

He chuckled under his breath, “That’s what everyone says.”

The alpha walked several steps further in the restroom but didn’t come any closer. “This is the only place I can catch you without Doctor Bloom giving me the evil eye.”

“From what I understand,” Will muttered, “That’s never bothered you.”

The elder man took a deep breath, and purposely pushed back the spike of guilt that flashed through him, “I asked you once if you trusted my judgment, and you said yes. Can I get that trust back or are we done?”

As he dried his hands, he wondered if Alana would brave the general men’s toilets anyway once she got word of Jack Crawford being in the same building; he was starting to regret ignoring her directions to the omega-only lavatories on the next level. At his silence, Crawford rubbed his terse brow and turned away to hold the door shut when someone pushed from the other side. “*Bathroom’s closed*!” He bellowed, and shoved the door one more time when the intruder was persistent.

When it appeared that they were alone again, Crawford sighed, tired. “Are you going to answer me or are we going to stand here?”

Though Will didn’t blame the man – the alpha was a victim too, whether Crawford knew it or not – he wasn’t exactly comfortable being around the man who’d been the first domino to fall in the cascading pile-up that led his incarceration.

“I think at some point, security is going to realize that someone’s barricaded the men’s room and we’ll be asked to leave.”

The previous head of the BAU ignored his sarcasm entirely, “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: I was wrong, I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“You weren’t *wrong*, Agent Crawford,” Will muttered despite his common sense telling him to shut up and walk away, “you were *played*.”

One would think that the head of the BAU would be harder to trick.

“I want to make things right.”

Will shook his head, “You didn’t make me crash the car.”

Didn’t I? The man was stoically silent.

“Look, it’s over – let’s just forget it,” Will rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the bin for the paper towels, reluctant to turn and face his – *what* the hell were they, colleagues? Had Jack been his boss? He supposed they were friends before, well, *friendly*; the Crawfords used to be regulars at the Lecter dinner table and Hannibal had considered Jack a friend. That was over two years ago – and there had been two years to heal from that, even if one threw in the car accident and the amnesia.

“Is that permission to borrow your insight?”

Will almost reeled at the alpha’s complete lack of tact.

“Get in line,” he mumbled in the end, because he couldn’t work up the energy to bother being angry. “Can I leave now?”

Jack Crawford stepped out of his way and gestured for him to go ahead. Will forced down the urge to say ‘thank you’ and left. As predicted, the alpha followed him out.

“I heard you’ve been consulting for Ed Moses.”

Will quickened his pace.

“Did you ever wonder why the Ripper and Butcher never tried to communicate?” The alpha asked, keeping up easily and ignoring the subtle omega body-signals for him to back off.

It was a completely left-of-field question and Will slowed to listen despite his misgivings.

“You once said that being a serial killer was a lonely life, that it made them fallible, because sooner or later, they’d want to be *known* – and you told me two years ago that the Maestro was serenading someone. That got me thinking; both the Cheasapeake Ripper and the Bureau Butcher, they share many signature components to their kills–”

Possible signature components, Will silently corrected in his mind.

“–so it begs the question,” Jack Crawford took another step towards him, almost crowding him despite the empty width of the hallway, “Why didn’t they ever try to make contact? The Maestro is out there right down, terrorizing Greater Baltimore, leaving messages to whoever; why didn’t these two do the same?”

Shall I list the personality disorders that might come between them being pals or would you like to guess?

“Ever thought about them getting together?”

Will ran a hand through his hair and tried not to give into the urge to curl in on himself, “I try not to.”

Provided they got over their massive egos, it would be a mutual appreciation society of two against the world; they’d each have their own perfect partner-in-crime. *Oh the fun they’d have together*, confounding the authorities, punishing with impunity, each others' confidant and alibi and back-up – they’d be almost invincible; and assuming the Butcher really was a member of the FBI, reveling up-close and personal in the chaos they were inflicting.

“What if they already were? Or rather, they were never separate at all.”

Will cocked his head to the side, “Alter-ego?”

Jack Crawford gave him a bleak smile, “Not quite.”

Heading for the building exit at a much slower pace now, Will stared at the floor and tried not to seem like he was too interested in this new line of inquiry.

“I’ve been looking back over crimes spanning two decades, trying to see if I can find any links to previously unsolved homicides – you don’t wake up one day an experienced criminal mastermind – and I think I found it: a series of homicides in New Orleans back in 2002.”

Will tried to not to flinch at the reference to his own time in the southern city; he’d think that the man was trying to imply he was suspect if it wasn’t for the genial mood that the alpha was projecting – Jack Crawford was in full alpha-protector mode, and if Will was a suspect, the agent wouldn’t be able to hide his simmering-rage.

“There was a serial killer, nicknamed the Enforcer; victims were all single, male alphas, killed over three-months in a calculated spree; the police considered it a vigilante, because the victims were all regulars at the Quarter, part of the party scene, and were all shot through the vocal cords, castrated and then left to bleed-out; unsub was never caught and fell off the radar by 2003, the BAU gave a profile consult but never took the case – there was one death out of the five that didn’t add up.”

Will racked his brain, trying to remember what he could about the unsolved series of homicides in New Orleans that he’d read about. All of it had happened post-August 5th, his last clear memory. Up ahead, Alana appeared from around the corner, obviously come to track him down – he didn’t need to see her face to read the immediate concern that flashed through her entire frame and sent her almost storming down the hall towards them.

Jack Crawford kept a careful eye on her approach, one foot already pivoted in the opposite direction. “In December 2002, victim number four – Mike Chaplain – he's the outlier. On the surface, he fit in with others; regular on the bar scene, late twenties-early thirties, alpha, unmated but established in his career and making his rounds on the dating scene. Except the others had histories of violence towards their bed partners – mostly beta females – and were living a double-life as responsible members of society, while Chaplain was picked up once or twice in his early twenties to spend the night in the drunk-tank but had no other run-ins with the law.”

Will’s brain leaped ahead of the agent. “This unsub had an accomplice who killed Chaplain. Or a teacher maybe – you think it was the Ripper?”

The ex-head of the BAU shot him a grim smile, and turned to face the beta quickly approaching them.

“Agent Crawford,” Alana Bloom greeted, voice flat.

“Doctor Bloom,” the alpha said, tipping his head in greeting as he turned to leave. “It’s good to see you, Will, take care.”

Jack Crawford hurried away.

Alana crossed her arms and gave him a concerned frown, “Was he harassing you?”

Will glanced at the retreating back and slowly shook his head.

“No,” he said, then ducked his head and brushed past, his thoughts twisting like vines within the confines of his skull.

Chapter End Notes

So...my chapters seem to be getting longer and longer. Huh.
PS - I heard about what's happened in Paris, since it was Saturday morning in Oz already when it started. I feel pretty powerless and awful in general - so I wrote; I hope this cheers someone up.

左右为难

Chapter Summary

Guess who's coming to dinner...

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - my Chinese is only conversational, please don't maim me for making an attempt here
Chapter title is an idiom which basically means you're in a pinch and can't see a way out; literally, there's problems coming at you from both directions (sorry, Will, but you're surrounded by crazy)
Unbetad. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will couldn't help his small grin as Micah refused to leave Kathy's front doorway and waved with his entire body, almost jumping up and down as he swung his arms above his head. Beside him, Aaron decided that it looked like fun, and joined in. Greg Prescott appeared in the door frame, waved at him with a long-suffering smile before convincing both boys that there was something better inside. The man disappeared after them and then Kathy was there, throwing him a mischievous wink as she shut the front door. His small grin stayed as he finished reversing out onto the street and started the drive home.

Despite telecommuting once a week to sit in on Rob Papparella's lectures in preparation for when he took back over, there had been no further activity from either the Maestro or the Not-Butcher in the new year and the almost non-stop stream of FBI emails slowed to a crawl. Which was a relief, as life in the Lecter household had returned quickly back to its usual rhythm once school started up again.

Will pulled to a stop at the red lights, and found his eyes drawn to the little girl who was skipping at her mother's side, hand-in-hand. His thoughts went instantly to Elizabeta, who had finally (bless her relentlessness) *finally* arbitrated a compromise in the on-going 'Papa, No Piano Lessons Please' dispute, on the condition she kept up with gymnastics until spring; apparently post-spring break, she was switching to self-defence and archery ("I'm going to be a ninja who rides a horse and shoots arrows," she announced to the dinner table in between bites of broccoli, "Like in papa's paintings," to which Hannibal smiled indulgently and said, "That's a samurai, Eli, who practices *yabusame*,") while Micah started looking for a suitable instrument under Papa's careful guidance.

January swept by in broad strokes – and now, the scheduled Lecter dinner party was only days away. It was possibly even more significant than their weekend away, as it would be their first time entertaining as a couple in almost three years. Will had reservations about the entire thing – because unlike that night in D.C. he definitely wanted to *avoid* alienating these people – but he was determined to see it through.

Not for himself (frankly he *couldn't care less*) but for Hannibal and their children, who were part of this strange world called 'society' that had debutantes, garden tea parties and golfing weekends at the country club. Thankfully the Prescotts and Alana would be among the guests as well as, to his surprise, Robert Papparella – apparently the retired FBI agent was an old acquaintance of Hannibal's from a one-off FBI consult years ago and the alpha was only too happy to extend an invite upon realizing that Will was fond of the man.

Turning into their street, Will pulled up in front of the neighbor's house, frowning at the unfamiliar car in his usual spot. After a fortnight of running more errands in the alpha's stead, relishing in his newfound freedom at being able to drive again, he was coming to know the people whom populated their corner of Baltimore, from the supermarket lady who always dotted upon Junior to their neighbors, the VanMergens and the Richardsons, and had even met a few of Hannibal's professional peers beyond Alana Bloom. This car, however, was not one he knew... it wasn't as fancy as the Bentley, but it was nice enough – maybe one of Hannibal's younger colleagues?

He knew neither Tomas nor Elizabeta were home and so wasn't surprised when only the dogs greeted him. He half-expected Hannibal to arrive with Junior on one hip – the toddler hated waiting a moment longer for his hello-cuddle – but as Will hung up his coat next to the unfamiliar one, he caught the delicious aromas of dinner and knew that the alpha was probably preoccupied.

"Hello?" He called out, bending over to pet the dogs, "Hannibal?"

A moment later, the sound of footsteps could be heard. He straightened just in time for the alpha to wrap an arm around his waist.

"Will, right on time," the alpha smiled, voice low, "We have a guest."

"Who is it?" Will glanced down at Winston's growl.

He frowned at the dog's odd behavior but was quickly distracted by Hannibal sliding off his scarf, pressing a nose to the side of his neck in an affectionate greeting. He tilted his head for a kiss and let himself be guided down the corridor.

"Mister Graham-Lecter," Tobias Budge greeted with a warm smile, standing up from his seat at the dining table, "It's so lovely to see you again."

Will's smile froze as his suppressed flinch rattled through his frame like a shudder.

A dozen questions pierced his throat in a split second – *what was Budge doing here, did the man know about his connection to Agent Moses, why was he* here *in his dining room* – followed a bitter burn down his esophagus because Hannibal had *no idea* that this man might

be a serial killer; his eyes flicked to the heavy bronzed pots flanking either end of the ledge above the fireplace, hard enough to crack a man's skull open; the sharp glint of the heavy European dinner knives on the table; the crystal bowl centerpiece, weighed down with dark smooth rocks and filled to the brim with water and lilies, the occasional flash of a tiny goldfish navigating between the dark green stalks.

"I ran into Mister Budge today after my meeting with Mrs. Mandaville – remember how I told you that the harpsichord needed to be restrung?"

Will nodded vaguely, feeling sick to his stomach; he should have told Hannibal about the beta being a suspect instead of avoiding all talk about his work, he should have *said something*. Hannibal went to where a place had been set for Will, and pulled out the chair, "It just happens so Mister Budge had some time today and graciously offered his services."

Still not trusting his voice, Will took his seat between the two men, at the head of the table on the opposite end from the alpha's usual place. The suspected serial killer sat back down.

"It was no trouble at all," Tobias Budge smiled genially, "You have a beautiful instrument."

Hannibal's hands stroked over the slopes of his shoulders; unlike other times, Will didn't relax at the familiar touch. "Thank you. It's of particular sentimental value to me as one of the few heirlooms to survive the war."

Nap returned to his usual spot by the fireplace but didn't lie down on his belly as he usually would, instead remaining alert and anxious in response to Winston's unease.

The alpha excused himself to bring out the first course – a cold dish of *sake* wine-marinated shrimp sprinkled with lemon juice and garnished with basil-infused black caviar; an exquisite dish he'd had once in Hong Kong, which he hoped to do justice to tonight.

"I am sure it will be delicious," Budge said without a hint of obsequiousness.

Will took a deep drink of his water as he was left alone with the luthier.

"I hear that congratulations are in order," the beta smiled.

Slowly Will lowered his water goblet.

"Doctor Lecter was just telling me that you're cleared to return to work – you're in academia?"

He heard himself speak as if from faraway; "Yes," he answered, "I lecture."

"What's your specialty?"

Will forced himself to meet the man's eyes, forced himself to *see* –

A self-made man who worked hard to get where he was; parents long-dead, he didn't miss them; he enjoyed being a bachelor, he enjoyed the freedom to do what he wanted and go where he wished; he had no use for family; he was never short of company, platonic or

otherwise, with his tall trim physique, his dark exotic skin-tone, his confident bearing. He considered himself an artist, unique and superior to the plebeian masses...

“Behavioral analysis, criminology,” he muttered, averting his gaze to the goldfish-centerpiece as he struggled to retain everything and make sense of it all in the context of everything else he knew.

He cleaned his hands with the sanitizing towelette knotted like a flower and tried to ignore the beta’s stare.

Hannibal emerged from the kitchen, wheeling a dumbwaiter containing the appetizers and a bottle of white wine chilling in an ice bucket. “There’s something about the savory tartness of the shrimp paired with the rich caviar and that *hint* of basil which I just love,” the alpha continued.

Will studied the beta’s face, his genuine approval at the visual beauty of Hannibal’s presentation; “You’re a man of hidden talent, Doctor.”

Hannibal took the compliment with a magnanimous tip of his head.

Will studied the plate in front of him; jumbo shrimps laid out in a fan of four on a bed of sliced lemon halves layered like fish-scales, with a swirl of black caviar encircling everything like a border, bleeding a fresh basil-green.

The wine paired with the food was poured with the usual elegance.

“Bon appétit,” Hannibal tipped his glass in a salute before sitting down to take an appreciative sip.

Picking up his wine, Will mirrored the alpha but took a deep fortifying gulp. Hannibal glanced over, smile turning quizzical. He pretended not to notice and started to eat.

A conversation began about the food, with Hannibal obviously relishing the opportunity to share his love of the culinary arts with someone whom, even if not an gourmand of the same caliber, was able to appreciate the nuances of taste and artistry involved. Slowly, Will began to calm as the appetizers were finished and the soup was served – pork ribs, baby carrots and peanuts slow-cooked in a clay-pot in the oven.

There was probably no reason to suspect Tobias Budge of having ulterior motives to be here – considering how enclosed the cultural arts community was in Baltimore, the run-in was likely *just* a coincidence. Not to mention, Agent Moses was too professional to have revealed any details of the current case, including his small part in pointing the FBI in Budge's direction. But his anxiety grew as his mind seized upon one single detail that he just couldn’t recall no matter how hard he tried – *who questioned Tobias Budge two years ago?*

The conversation turned to *Chordophone* being closed for over a month, since the week before Christmas, for ongoing renovations – the doors and windows were to be swapped out for enforced glass, and a new security system was to be installed.

“I don’t usually follow the tabloids but it’s all over the news, the deaths – have you seen?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied in between careful sips of soup, “Terrible business.”

“Very. The parents of my students are very concerned.”

“Did you know any of the deceased? I was only acquainted with Mister Bresling and Ms. Puente.”

“I knew all of them to some degree - it’s unavoidable in my line of work,” Budge turned to him, “Are you assisting the FBI?”

Will’s fingers tightened around the cool metal of his spoon, his eyes jerking from his bowl to Budge’s hands as his entire body tensed.

“You were a consultant on the original case, weren’t you? Sorry,” Budge went back to his soup, “It’s probably not the kind of thing one wants to talk about at dinner, but as someone in the Baltimore arts community, I’m naturally very concerned.”

Except thirty-minutes ago, the man *didn’t even know* what Will’s profession was – now he *suddenly* remembered that Will had been a consultant for the Douglas Wilson homicide?

Hannibal nodded, “Yes of course.”

The beta smiled, perfectly polite, dark eyes intent as their gazes met; Will averted his eyes and surreptitiously reached for his cell phone only to realize he'd left it in his coat pocket.

“I’m not consulting,” he forced himself to take a sip of water, “I’m still on leave from classes until after spring break.”

Winston nudged against his thigh and Will reached down to curl his fingers through the scuff of the dog’s fur, letting the dog take some of his tension. Dee snuffled against his ankles, anxious enough to take shelter under her favorite human’s chair.

“Yes, Will’s been on a sabbatical, to look after our youngest,” Hannibal smiled proudly and absently petted Winston, curling his fingers over the top of Will’s in a small gesture of comfort. He glanced up and gave his alpha a brief smile.

Tobias Budge made the usual congratulatory remarks, not a single social note out of tune and *yet*… Will put down his spoon, nauseous.

“Where’s Junior?”

Even if the toddler was extra tired or took a much later nap than usual, he should be up by now – it was nearly seven.

Hannibal smiled, “He’s gone for a drive with Irene to pick up Tomas and Elizabeta.”

Will exhaled slowly so as to not give away how relieved he was to know it was only them in the house. Tomas was coming straight home but Elizabeta was having dinner at her friend

Riley's house tonight, and so Irene wouldn't be back until after seven-thirty; for once, Will was glad of Hannibal's emphasis on all the children having extracurricular activities and plenty of socialization. In his peripheral vision, Tobias Budge polished off his soup with an appreciative hum.

"Thank you again, on Tomas' behalf," Hannibal said as he got up to collect their plates, "He's been counting down to next Friday for weeks."

"Oh no, it's my pleasure," Tobias Budge took a sip of his wine, "It's so hard to find a true artist these days."

Will studied the beta out of his corner of his eyes; he was *strong*, strong enough that he might just be strong enough to carry a corpse; he had all the right credentials and connections to be waltzing in and out of the Meyerhoff and the Stanmore with no one the wiser; he had the technical skills; he had the audacity – that confidence of his bordered on narcissism.

"It can be," Hannibal pulled a bottle of red wine from the lower tier of the dumbwaiter and served the table. He collected away the used white wine glasses but left the ones for dessert wine where they were.

"Tomas is a credit to you."

Will didn't miss the way that Hannibal's mouth gave a little twitch of pleasure, exuding deep paternal pride. The alpha announced that the main would be a surprise and excused himself from the dining room, explaining that he'll be missing for a few minutes to get everything ready.

Tobias Budge sniffed the red wine before taking a careful sip, rolling the liquid around on his tongue. "This is very good; French?"

"Virginian."

"Really?" The beta glanced at the dark red liquid, "I thought it was French."

"The Virginian wine revolution is upon us," he quoted tartly as a sudden burst of bravado hit him, unable to put up with the tension any longer. "Mister Budge, forgive me for being blunt – did you kill Albert Bresling?"

Tobias Budge took a measured sip of his wine as though one of his dinner hosts hadn't just accused him of being a serial killer.

"Do you really have to ask?"

Will took a deep breath.

It wasn't a yes – *but it wasn't a no.*

"Did you kill Douglas Wilson?"

“The trombonist? Altogether horrible what happened,” Budge swapped out his wine for a sip of water, “Well, *not* altogether. I’d say the orchestra has been better for it. So…I think the answer to that is…yes.”

He blinked, momentarily thrown by the audacious *almost-gleeful* admission of guilt.

“The murders are being investigated by the FBI,” he said as though he were commenting on the weather; a shrill voice inside his head told him to stop provoking the psychopath. His mouth moved as though out of his control; “They’re going to catch on.”

“Let them.”

Will paused at that.

“You want to get caught," he surmised, hiding his confusion.

Tobias Budge smirked, “I want them to try. They’ve questioned me and found nothing twice now – they’ll question me again, and I will be released again.”

Hannibal re-entered the room, dumbwaiter bearing a covered platter which he revealed with a flourish. A slab of meat, well-roasted and crackling on the outside, rested upon a bed of candied-pansies in dark purples and lush foliage, steam curling upwards like flowery ghosts.

“Hmm, that smells wonderful – roast pork, Doctor Lecter?”

The alpha threw Will a smirk as he began to carve, “*Porchetta*, but not in the Italian-style – this was made with lemongrass, Himalayan salt and coriander, then basted in tamarind and sugarcane juice.”

Will looked down at the plate he was given; three slices of succulent porchetta served upon a green leafy salad with a bird's nest of straw-like carrots dashed with toasted sesame and some pungent salty-sweet dressing. His eyes drifted to the carving knife and tongs set on the plate between Hannibal’s place setting and his.

“You know, we actually first met a few years ago.”

Hannibal straightened and cocked his head to the side.

“It was at the opera,” Budge prompted.

“Ah yes,” the alpha returned to his food, “You’re friends with a patient of mine, Franklyn.”

Going by the overly-bright tone of voice, his mate didn’t like this particular patient of his much.

“I’ve been several times since,” Budge’s eyes flicked to Will, “I don’t believe I’ve seen you there.”

He avoided the man’s gaze, “It’s not really my scene.”

“Pity, the program is quite good this season.”

“I did enjoy *Aida*,” Hannibal deftly sliced off a portion of pork, “We’ve been invited by Mrs. Mandeville to the upcoming performance.”

“Maybe we'll see each other there then," Budge said, his eyes glancing over to the side at Will.

Hannibal smiled. “Are you enjoying the pork?”

“It’s delicious. I may even ask for seconds.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment but you may wish to save your stomach for dessert.”

The beta glanced at him again. Will fumbled for his wine and took a deep drink as Hannibal excused himself to check on said dessert.

“You’re going to be arrested,” he said, so softly as to be almost a whisper.

Tobias Budge turned from where he’d been staring after the alpha, “If they send officers to arrest me, I’d kill them. Then I would find Doctor Lecter, and kill him.”

Will took a deep breath and felt a curl of pain through his chest at the thought of the alpha being taken from the children, from him. His fingers tightened around his knife and fork; “Why are you doing this?”

The beta’s smirk drifted into something darker, “Surely you can guess.”

Budge resumed eating like he hadn’t declared his intention to murder at least one of his hosts.

“I *was* going to kill Doctor Lecter. I was even looking forward to it, but there’s risks to killing someone married to an FBI agent,” the man chewed thoughtfully on a bite of meat and paused to take a sip of wine; Will didn’t correct the man’s erroneous impression that he was a member of the BAU.

“Then I thought,” Budge leaned in closer as if sharing a secret, “killing you *first* would probably be better.”

Will’s hand clenched around his knife as he felt the coil of anger tighten around his stomach. “What made you stop? *Or*,” he gave the man a stony look, “have you stopped?”

The beta gestured vaguely to the ceiling with his fork; “I started reconsidering my plans when I followed you one night. Out of town. Out of state. To a lonely road. To the house of a fellow FBI employee. Does your husband know about your extracurricular activities?”

He stared back at the beta, somehow keeping his hand still as he reached for his water. His accident had been out of state; he’d been heading home after a drive through the middle of nowhere.

(“Do you have secrets?”

"If I did, it's all gone... I am a blank slate.")

An affair?

Improbable; with the way Hannibal doted upon him, the evidence scattered around the house of their loving marriage, most clearly captured in their four healthy and happy children, he wouldn't have had any desire to stray.

A secret identity?

Will might have lost thirteen years of memories but he knew who he was – his life was not some Robert Ludlum novel. The beta gave him a slow smile, obviously thinking that Will had frozen in fear of having his secret exposed, rather than descended into mental chaos over the fact that *he didn't remember that he had a secret at all.*

"Imagine my surprise," Budged toasted him with his almost-empty wineglass, "Who would have thought – I certainly *never* would have guessed – FBI consultant by day…"

The beta didn't finish his sentence, draining his glass instead. Will's brain made a jump that didn't make sense: FBI consultant by day, *wanted killer by night.*

His chest burned from the lack of oxygen.

"Don't worry," the man nicknamed the Maestro assured him as the silence dragged on, "I'm not going to tell anyone what I saw you do – and do *well*."

By his side, Winston let out a growl. Budge grinned at the dog peering at him from the other corner of the table and cocked an eyebrow, exuding an almost palpable sense of menace. With a little noise of confusion, Winston broke off the stare and did a circle before nudging his head against Will's thigh.

"Excuse me," he stood and opened the door to order the dogs out into the courtyard. Winston snuffled with a whine at his knee before following Dee outside; a reluctant Nap had to be nudged over the threshold. He made sure they were all safely in the shelter before shutting the door firmly.

Budge stood up behind him.

"I could use a friend..."

Will almost laughed – he'd always known it was a serenade, even two years ago according to his old notes… Jack Crawford's words popped into the forefront of his mind; what drove even the most intelligent and meticulous of killers to shed the shadows and step into the light? *Poor* lonely *intelligent psychopath, sending bodies out like ads in the classifieds, looking for a like-minded friend.*

"Someone who sees the world I do," the beta gave him an intent look, "who understands my art."

Will raised an eyebrow at the dark reflection of the man in the glass of the door; what art would that be? *Human cellos*?

This isn't how he kills - how he kills, he won't get caught - this is just for you...

The omega froze as the realization swept over him of what the murders represented; when the colonies had first settled, old traditions had been brought back in response to the lawless state of the land – including the ancient tradition of alphas killing off a clan's enemies to win favor from the clan's of-age omegas. Many a dynasties had began and been ended through the practice. However, Tobias Budge had no interest in sleeping with him – no, he was just showing his *hand of friendship*, by harkening back to that time when omegas would ally with the powerful and the strong to protect oneself and one's own.

Will slowly turned to face the man, "I think you have the wrong person."

The beta cocked an eyebrow.

"Is it your husband?"

Will picked up the bottle of wine and started to top up the glasses, placing the dining table between him and the beta. He didn't let go of the bottle.

"I won't tell the good doctor, if that's what you're worried about," the beta sat back down, smiling with sickening grandiosity, "In any case, you have him eating out of the palm of your hand."

His eyes flashed as a surge of protective-anger rose up within him.

"Did you come here today to threaten me?"

"Threaten *you*?" The man seemed bemused, and his voice lowered even more, making Will almost strain to hear him; "I wouldn't *dare*; which really, how did you manage to trick the FBI into letting you into their Academy? I thought there were tests."

In harmony with cosmic irony, Hannibal re-entered the room. Will almost jumped.

The alpha paused mid-step at the sight of his mate out of his seat and clutching at the wine bottle so hard his fists were white but recovered quickly, putting on a genial smile as he described the dessert they were to enjoy tonight: a sweet pudding made of tofu, with the consistency of rich creamy pannacotta, flavored with sweetened coconut milk and French vanilla – the first time the alpha came across the dessert was in Sapporo, Japan, and he'd been so shocked that it *wasn't* pannacotta that he'd immediately asked to see the chef.

"It sounds delicious, Doctor Lecter, but I'm afraid I must go," Budge stood, "As you know I'm currently staying with a friend; I'd hate to keep them up waiting – I've enjoyed tonight so much, I've completely lost track of time."

Hannibal smiled at the implied compliment. Will dropped his hands to his sides but didn't let go of the wine bottle, holding the neck as if it were the handle of a bat.

“Of course,” the alpha nodded, “Would you like to take dessert with you?”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

Barely a minute later, the beta had donned his coat and was thanking them both once more for an enjoyable evening, his dark eyes deliberately dragging across Will’s expressionless face as he stepped off from the portico.

When the man’s car pulled out from the front of their house – not a moment too soon, as Irene was due back in a few – Will turned and fell into the alpha’s side, feeling wretched down to his very feet as his vines within his mind convulsed, twisting tighter and tighter until his very skull ached. Hannibal wrapped his arms around him, smelling of the wonderful scents from his hard work in the kitchen, warm and steady.

“A long day?” The alpha murmured, nosing at his hair.

Will buried his face into his mate’s neck and gave a slight nod, almost trembling as the aftershocks of his conversation with Tobias Budge made themselves known. Part of him wanted to run out to the car and hunt the beta down to demand *what he knew*, what he *saw Will do –*

What had he been hiding before he lost his mind?

Another part of him already knew - that specter of him just wanted to limp into the shower, turn it on to full blast and hide from the world.

Hannibal reached back with his foot and shut the door.

Will held the cold glass of whiskey up to his brows and closed his eyes, almost sagging in his armchair. The fireplace gave a crackle but settled down again – unlike his head, which continued to seethe and bubble like a boiling sea of chaos. He heard the sound of the door opening and closing gently, and felt a tug of distant guilt at having essentially abandoned Hannibal to settle down the kids tonight while he hid in here like a sulky teenager. There’s a drag of the other armchair being shifted closer and then the sound of the alpha exhaling as he sat next to him.

“How many have you had?”

He opened his eyes to study the tumbler of whiskey, the ice cubes clinking as he tilted it. “Enough,” he muttered, and relinquished his drink.

Hannibal set it aside, his face free from accusation or disdain.

Will sighed tiredly and leaned towards the older man, "Aren't you gonna tell me that it's bad for me to drink so much?"

"I used to have a drink with my psychiatrist – or rather, she had a drink with me," the alpha mused, "I had an unconventional psychiatrist."

"How long had you been seeing a psychiatrist?"

"Since I became a psychiatrist."

He turned back to face the alpha as a thought came to him, "*Did* I see a psychiatrist before– before the accident, I mean?"

"No, you didn't."

Yes, that's right – because that would be too easy. It would sure come in handy right now though, having a professional secret keeper to call upon for details of *all* his dirty laundry, so he could arm himself against the consequences of them being dragged into the light of day.

"Unless you count me," the alpha gave him a fond look, "Your husband, the psychiatrist."

Will smiled wanly, appreciative of the man's attempt to cheer him up even though his spirits stubbornly refused to rise tonight – for any reason except perhaps Budge's immediate death.

"Tell me – the accident," he paused, almost frightened to ask – the list of questions seemed to grow exponentially the more times he replayed the conversation at dinner, tossing out the possibilities and examining all the angles. "I was on the interstate…"

Hannibal reached out to take his hand, "Yes, you were returning from Rappahannock, Virginia."

"Why would I go there?"

The alpha squeezed his hand in comfort, "You went for a drive, as one does."

"In Rappahannock?"

Hannibal smiled, "It's a lovely place, we've been there together several times."

Will tried to remember the details of the police report for his accident; he'd been on the I-95 S but that was still far enough away from Rappahannock county that he could have just as well been out there to visit somewhere else. The alpha stood and disappeared to the back corner of the room, the sound of armoire doors opening could be heard followed immediately by the safe containing the hard-copies of patient notes being opened.

Hannibal returned and passed him a plain manila folder.

Will took it, confused – until he flipped it open.

“Did you *steal* this?” He asked, somewhere between amazed and disconcerted; it was a complete color-copy of the police report for his accident, nothing like the grainy censored photocopies which he’d been given at the hospital.

“I pulled some strings,” the alpha admitted.

“Who did you sleep with?” Will absently quipped, already lost in the file; he flipped to the map, which had his route from the middle-of-nowhere Rappanhannock to the crash site highlighted in pink, on top of the blue lines highlighting the typical route he’d take for these scenic drives of his. It's a lot more detail that one would see usually for a crash investigation, but then he supposed that when accident involved an FBI consultant, it would be examined more closely for any signs of foul play.

“I’m acquainted with the Bishops through their daughter, a past patient of mine, and once the case had been closed, I asked for a favor.”

He glanced up, not recognizing the name.

“The police commissioner, Martin J. Bishop.”

Ah, to have friends in high places… Why was he not surprised?

Hannibal leaned over the armrest to press a kiss to his temple, “Don’t stay up too late.”

Will nodded and leaned up to nose against the alpha’s jaw. “Good night,” he whispered, managing to draw up enough energy to give the man a smile.

Hannibal smiled back.

He waited until the alpha was gone before turning his attention back to file. He studied the photographs of the crash itself, the twisted-metal of his station-wagon, the front completely crushed against the thick tree trunk he’d run into, the skid-marks of an unknown vehicle in the vicinity of his crash – it had been examined by deemed irrelevant. He flicked back through the official report, skimming the parts he already knew and focusing on the parts he didn’t, his eyes coming back to the map again and again. Then, closing his eyes, he let the pendulum drop.

He had left the GPS device at home along with Micah and the baby, even though any other day he would take them with him. Marie didn’t question it, didn’t think of it as strange, just wished him luck and asked when he would leave. Will had told her that he needed to go right after he got changed; upstairs, he’d thrown the outfit laid out for him into a duffle to take with him and then put together something plain and utterly forgettable – old jeans, an old plaid shirt only worn for fishing trips, scuffed muddy boots that everyone from the postman

to the vet might own, a non-descript khaki wind jacket, an old baseball cap; then he left with thankfully brief goodbyes, both children distracted by the announcement that Marie would be taking them out to play.

Kathy had sent a text message sometime around when he crossed into Virginia, wondering why the boys were at the park and he wasn't; he'd replied that he was being retested for his gun proficiency today and the shooting range at Quantico wasn't child-friendly; she'd sent him a smiley face; he'd replied that he was turning off his phone now, see you tomorrow; *youbetcha*, knock them out, she texted back with a wink.

Will chuckled, pulled into the next gas station and took out his sim-card, dropping it into the lead-lined box he kept in his armoire (he'd never quite understood why he had it; well, now he knew) before turning on his burner phone. Then he took out the tasergun he'd found wrapped in a beanie stuffed in the back of his safe, and double-checked the charge. He tucked it securely in his jacket pocket.

In truth, he'd never used a tasergun before – they hadn't been a standard part of law enforcement equipment back in 2002 – but he'd seen a few videos online and felt confident that he could point-and-shoot in an emergency, especially since the recoil was supposed to be the same if not lighter than discharging a gun. Besides, he had Beverly and the emergency services on speed-dial.

Will drove on, not even slowing as he passed the crash site. He did have an appointment at Quantico today – it just wasn't until the late afternoon.

It took over almost three-hours to get to the small roads where the police believed he'd been. By the time he turned off the main roads, there were only the occasional passing vehicle and wide rolling hills filled with paddocks and then, as he drew closer and closer to his destination, the trees began to multiply until soon, it seemed that he'd arrived at the mouth of a forest.

It's a long-shot, but the driveway wasn't fenced – the gate was old rotting wood and long collapsed to the side of the road – and it was the only evidence of human habitation for several miles. He would have missed it himself, if he hadn't been looking.

Will ran the possibilities in his head as he came upon the lonely cottage set at the end of the dirt track, intending to use every appeasement technique and omega stereotype to gain the confidence of the residents. Perhaps it wouldn't even come down to that though – back in New Orleans, his omega status had worked in his favor, making him instantly popular with all children and a favorite of the elderly and other omegas, as well as young female betas.

The first signs that he might be disappointed were the drawn curtains and the undisturbed path of mud and rotted leaves to the porch steps. If there was a mailbox, he hadn't seen it, neither on the side of the road nor along the winding driveway.

Will switched off the engine, took a deep breath and pulled on his leather gloves. Then he got out gingerly, avoiding the puddle he'd parked over.

Among the overgrown bare trees that surround the house like a thicket of barbs, beady little eyes turned in his direction. The crows let out unhappy squawks and ruffled their wings at his passing but settled back on their perches to be his witnesses.

Will knocked, waited a half-minute, and then a second time louder. He called out a greeting, asked if anyone was home, and when there's no answer, he tried to the door handle. Locked.

Walking around the side and trying to peer through the gauzy curtains, Will tried knocking several more times while asking if anyone was home, this time upon the windows. He's about to give it up for a loss, when something grabbed at him from his peripheral vision.

Slowly, Will turned back.

A wind-chime hung over the back porch from a beam that connected the backdoor to the edge of the awning, looking like some dead jellyfish in the weak sunlight, the dangling parts dried and flattened. It was made of bamboo bits and fish skeletons, heads and tails attached to the spine through invisible nylon strings, and painfully familiar.

Will swallowed down the hard pip lodged in his throat as he reached out to touch it. The bones shifted at the slightest graze and the bamboo began to knock against one another – *clop...clop-clop...*

He remembered saving the bones, he had bought a secondhand wind-chime from a thrift store and scrapped it for parts, he'd worked on it for almost an entire semester, and he'd thrown it into an old coffee can to take with him to college – and later to New Orleans, with a degree under his belt and a badge on his chest.

Will turned to the other wind-chime, this one hanging in the far corner of the wraparound porch; a rack of antler suspended diagonally via gleaming silky wires to a sanded wooden slab, that was in turn anchored into another structural beam. Among the bone-bleached spikes, a school of 'fish' made of old spoons – from teaspoons to serving spoons that had their handles trimmed and split to look like fishtails – swam in perfect harmony.

He stared at it, struck by its asymmetrical beauty, its incongruity with the rough rural surrounds.

Forcing himself to turn away, Will tried the backdoor. Locked.

Reaching into his back pocket, he flicked open the small knife he'd brought and wedged it between the door and the frame, trying to jimmy the old latch. He braced his shoulder against the door and pushed, jerking the blade sharply to the right as he did so. The lock released and the door creaked open.

Will held his breath as he stepped inside.

The air was stale. No one had been here in months, perhaps even longer. There was thick plastic sheeting all over the floors, as though someone had laid them down to do some repainting and then forgotten about them. The couch in front of the stone-bricked fireplace was old but serviceable, and covered in a thick generic plaid throw. There was no hum from

fridge, no whine from the old TV in the corner – that wasn't even plugged in. He tried the light switch. Nothing.

Will wandered into the kitchen, its windows overlooking the back half of the wraparound porch. The tap was dry, the sink was dry – the smell of bleach had long since faded but everything looked orderly, sterile despite the old fixtures and aged cabinet doors. When he cracked open the fridge, it smelt of chlorine and plastic. The pantry was full; generic canned food, more bottles of spring water that one person could drink in six weeks, a well-stocked First Aid kit, a half-empty box of batteries along with several torches of varying types and sizes, and hidden behind all the toothpicks and unopened bottles of hot chili and ketchup, there was an worn Tupperware container of mixed ammunition, some of which looked ancient.

The bathroom was completely bare except for toilet paper and bottles of bleach lined up like bowling pins against the wall. There's no shower curtain, and no mirror.

In the bedroom, he found a queen mattress stripped of bedding, two dusty pillows. When he leaned in carefully, the bed smelt faintly of chemicals, as though recently dry-cleaned. In the wardrobe, there were no pillowcases, no sheets, not even a quilt; there was a rolled-up canvas duffle bag and a cheap and battered gym bag, along with several generic items of clothing in varying sizes, still with their Walmart tags attached, everything from coats to scarves to packets of new boxer briefs and t-shirts in basic white, black and grey. The drawers reveal several burner phones, and a collection of keys each with its own little mismatched dish to rest within.

There were seven tool kits under the bed, of varying age, color and style.

Will paused as he pulled out the largest one, an innocuous grey cantilever-style kit. He peeled back the trays and removed an antique skull saw with trembling hands as his thoughts twirled and twisted out from where they'd been coagulating in the back of his skull, streaming up to the ceiling like a waterfall defiant of gravity.

Half-remembered images ran through his mind like sand pouring between his fingers; he didn't know if they were his memories, something that someone had said or something that he had read, or his own wild imagination.

He put everything back and stood slowly, his burning eyes going to the only uncovered window in the cottage.

Outside in the pale light of a cloudy January day, the dark shape of a barn roof could be seen just peeking out from their evergreens camouflage.

His watch beeped.

Will checked the time; Micah and Junior were about to have lunch, and then Junior would probably go down for a nap while Micah played; Hannibal was seeing his second-last appointment for the day, then he'd have a late lunch with Doctor Singh and spend the afternoon at Port Haven Psychiatric for a consult; Tomas had gym and then lunch; Elizabeta

was at the museum today on an excursion and was probably staring up at the open jaws of a sabre-toothed tiger with wide fascinated eyes.

He left the way he came. As he passed by the wind-chime he'd built in high school shop class, Will brushed his leather-clad fingertips over the dangling bits of bamboo and bones. When he returned to the car, he got in from the passenger side to avoid the puddle and took off his soiled boots, throwing them in a black trash bag. He stripped off his clothes, which go into another trash bag, and stuff his gloves and tasergun back into his leather satchel. Both trash bags were squeezed into a FBI Academy gym bag and thrown onto the empty backseat. Then he dressed himself, wriggling left and right as he put on what Hannibal had picked out this morning, making sure to fix the collar just the right way and comb his hair back.

His stomach growled, reminding him that it was lunchtime for him too. Will ignored it and finished buttoning his shirt; there was bound to be some roadside diner/gas station along the way he could stop in at for a sandwich and a coffee before he was due at Quantico for his firearms test.

Will shifted against the thigh he was resting against and tapped his knuckles absently over the jut of Hannibal's knee. Gentle fingers combed through his hair as the alpha continued to read, his face lit by the glow of the iPad propped up on the armrest.

The afternoon at Quantico had been well-spent, and there was now a FBI-issued handgun in his personal safe. Beverly hadn't been there today – she was in court for the week – and he'd managed to avoid running into Jack Crawford.

Dinner had been normal, cheerful, delicious. He had shared a conspirator's grin with Hannibal as Elizabeta threw her arms up above her head to show them how big the dinosaur's skull was, Junior had eaten his dinner with only minimal mess, while Micah announced that he no longer liked tomatoes but was okay with ketchup and things made of tomato, just *not* raw or cooked tomatoes themselves; Tomas had barely finished his last bite before dashing away to finish a book report he'd forgotten about.

Bedtimes were adhered to; faces were washed, teeth were brushed, baths were had, stories were told, hugs were given and received and stolen.

(Somewhere inside his head, he barricaded the bathroom doors and curled up in the tub, running the tap to mask the sound of his choked sobs as he realized what he stood to lose – a specter that looked and sounded like him got out of the bathtub, furious and determined, leaving wet footsteps as he stormed the study and took out his gun, already concocting a plan to see the Maestro be killed in a shoot-out; it's self-defense, they'll say; he had it coming, they'll nod; this would take a little time and planning but it could be done - he just needed to do it *carefully*)

No one noticed anything different about him. He was still just Daddy, just Will, thirty-eight years old, mate of the esteemed Doctor Hannibal Lecter, with four children and three dogs; who had been a boat engine mechanic and a police officer and a forensics specialist; discharged from hospital three-months prior after a head trauma suffered during a car accident, and had once been held for several weeks under suspicion of being a notorious serial killer; and he couldn't remember anything beyond August 5th 2002 – yes, he'd woken up on October 22nd 2015, his slate wiped clean.

Tobias Budge might be the Maestro, but Will was – *what* was he?

Who was he?

The sum of the parts didn't add up correctly no matter how many times he turned the puzzle (*because no one could be in two places at once*). There was something that didn't fit about one of the corners (*everyone has thought about killing someone one way or another - but few actually act on these impulses...so, you have to wonder; how did one get started, what was the push, the kick, the drop of the pin*), and there was something distinctively odd about its dimensions...

Something was missing. *Or someone.*

His eyes fixed upon the painting above the fireplace; a gremlin-like creature sat on an unconscious woman's chest as she lay supine across a fainting couch.

He wasn't alone, he was never alone - someone was beside him in the dark...

"You've been very quiet tonight," Hannibal commented.

Will forced himself to stay relaxed, to dive through the tide of dread that wanted to engulf him; he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, calmly, a perfect mimicry of lassitude.

"I went for a drive before the test."

The alpha turned from the iPad and studied him for a moment, his eyes sharp. Will waited for the questions, the concern, the careful probing of his boundaries to see if asking about his obsession with the accident and his lost memories would be productive or just make him irritable tonight.

"Was it a good drive?" Hannibal asked.

Will's eyes drifted back to the gremlin in the painting. The nightmare stared back at him.

"It was educational."

The alpha's hand resumed their gentle stroking. Will closed his eyes, the cascading chaos of his thoughts rising up out from his skull like smoke.

Chapter End Notes

I recently re-watched season 3's dinner with Mason, Will and Hannibal. I lolled at the dialogue.
Also I know there might be no crows in winter in Virginia. It's a reference to Cassie Boyle, and Hannibal's little "I believe I can help good Will see (this killer's) face" moment of smartass

一回生，二回熟

Chapter Summary

A lunch date, a dinner party, a midnight excursion and a brunch

Chapter Notes

Title is a Chinese idiom - at first, something is unfamiliar but you get used to it (it's strange and unfamiliar at first but then it becomes an acquired taste/familiar)

I have no beta, and I've written this in bouts of creativity between my sick days/afternoons/whatever, so you know, errors abound I'm sure (and to Rav3nsta9, I kinda hijacked you randomly for ideas bouncing when you commented, you were really really helpful and nice about it - thank you)

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will stared blindly at the paintings as he waited on Hannibal's last appointment to finish. They'd planned weeks ago that they'd meet for lunch today and do some light shopping for any missed or store-only items for the dinner tomorrow. The main bulk of the fresh produce had been delivered just as he'd been preparing to leave; despite his insistence that he was happy to help, Marie had waved him off with firm instructions to get out of the house already – apparently he'd been looking way too drawn and pale for the past few days.

So he hadn't meant to come early, but there were only so many ways he could redirect her worried questions about how he was and what was going on before feeling like a liar or an ass. Plus, he had a headache, unsurprising after hours staring at FBI crime scene photos hoping to trigger something, *anything*. In short, his day so far had been an emotional merry-go-round of dread (*Tobias Budge*, his specter mused, *is a problem*), confusion and wild speculation. The ongoing *reinvigorated* night terrors and associated sleep deprivation probably didn't help either. Back in New Orleans, Will would have reached for the pills immediately; but he knew that if he started, he'd probably keep going, and it was a slippery slope from there – and as an ex-surgeon and psychiatrist, Hannibal would probably disapprove of his flagrant disregard for safe pharmaceutical practices.

The toddler wriggled down from the chair in the corner to land with surprising nimbleness and ran to him, doing a happy lap around Daddy before going to the chair in the opposite corner and throwing himself at it with all his determination, grabbing at the armrests while

his little legs swung in the air as he squirmed and twisted to get his knees some leverage. Will sat to watch him, endeared by how satisfied Junior was when he finally conquered the chair.

“Good job,” He grinned, wry, “I think instead of music lessons, you might like rock-climbing more, what do you think? Is Everest in your future?”

The toddler beamed back and got up on the chair, poised like he was going to jump. Will raised a warning eyebrow, “I thought we discussed this; no standing on the chairs. Come on honey, sit down.”

The child crouched down as though he was going to sit down but then changed his mind, rising up and readying himself to jump again.

“Come here, daddy!”

“*Junior*, come on,” He shook his head with a helpless smile, exasperated, “You’re gonna hurt yourself – who’s gonna catch you? Look, I’m over here.”

“Come *here*,” the toddler insisted.

With suspiciously good-timing, the door to Hannibal’s office opened and distracted both occupants of the waiting room. The last appointment, a dark-haired woman in a ruffled shirt and long winter skirt, paused on the threshold to give Will a reserved smile before turning to Hannibal.

“So that’s why you’re in such a good mood today,” she remarked, shrugging on her coat.

Hannibal gave his patient a small smile in answer, but his eyes were already on Will. The younger man stood at the flutter that went through his stomach, his mouth lifting at the edges despite the dread that's been chipping away at the back of his mind and his exhaustion from keeping a lid on everything; it’s flattering to be someone’s favorite person.

“PAPA! LOOK AT ME! UP!” Hannibal Junior shouted and threw his arms up in a leap for attention that was terrifying reminiscent of Micah’s wilder moods; the chair gave a dangerous wobble. Will’s adrenalin levels spiked as he prepared to leap forward and snatch up the toddler but then the alpha was in front of the boy and pulling him into his arms.

“We’ll have to work on your manners, young man,” Hannibal admonished fondly, then turned to his patient, “I’ll see you next week, same time.”

The woman’s mouth turned up in a half-grin at Junior’s fascinated stare, and left in a cloud of cinnamon and something darkly floral – interesting perfume, Will noted, the potency of it making him think that it was probably marketed towards alpha women.

“You’re early,” Hannibal commented, going back into his office.

Junior smiled sweetly over his Papa’s shoulder, like he hadn’t just attempted to throw himself off a chair and nearly shaved an entire decade off Will’s lifespan. The omega narrowed his eyes at the toddler and raised a finger in mock-warning;“Yes, well, I needed some air.”

The toddler waved at Daddy before turning his attention to his namesake – Will chuckled under his breath, already knowing that this was going to be the cheeky one out of the lot.

“Is everything alright?” The alpha scented Junior as he went around his desk, and unlocked a drawer to take out his cell phone.

Will’s about to reassure him that yes, everything was just fine thank you, but then his eyes took in the entirety of Hannibal’s office; the wraparound mezzanine-balcony library that enticed him to explore; the pitch black metal statuette of a stag underneath framed lithographs of European hunting parties; Saint Peter’s Square painted in simple white on black as shadows cast by pillars upon stone; a simple chair of plain unadorned stained wood flanked one side of a bookshelf while a white and powder-blue French rococo armchair stood at the other.

“Will?”

“Hmm?”

Just like their home, all the elements seemed to come together despite the crisscrossing eras, clashing cultures and seemly disconnected design philosophies. For a second, Will was disorientated until he realized that they *appeared* to match because they ultimately all lead back to Hannibal, whether they were personal furnishings like the Japanese prints, or more practical choices, like the psychology texts organized by author and year – he was the common thread connecting it all.

“No new developments since this morning?”

Will’s eyes were drawn to a small Japanese print of a woman in traditional clothes, wearing a headscarf that barely covered her loose bun with a fishing line jauntily slung over one shoulder and her left hand brandishing a bright yellow fish.

“Not really – the groceries arrived, they delivered it just as I was leaving,” Will turned from the picture, and wandered over to a small drawing table set up separately from the work desk, right in front of the fireplace.

“Excellent – and the delivery from the Emporium?”

“They called and said they’ll be there around four.”

He smiled a little at the placement of the drawing desk, knowing how much Hannibal enjoyed his *hearths* despite the symbolism in alpha provision of wood and fire to mate and child being considered old-fashioned by most and a little strange by others, except perhaps as a cinematic and literary allusion.

“You seem distracted.”

He gestured to the room, “I’ve never been in here before.”

“Would you like a tour?” Hannibal asked, amused yet genuine in his offer.

Will flipped through a few of the drawings and blinked at the half-finished study of a male nude in a seated position, with a *very familiar* profile, tucked in among the architectural sketches. He spun to face the alpha, faintly embarrassed, “Maybe another time.”

Going by the small smirk that Hannibal sent him, the man knew exactly what Will had seen and was daring him to say something. Will almost rolled his eyes, feeling a odd sense of vertigo as he intercepted the alpha and tilted his head for a kiss – like he’d never found a cabin in Rappahannock containing possible murder weapons, as though he wasn’t still there with his head in his hands, frozen in shock and terror, waiting for someone to tell him who he was.

“Kiss daddy, kiss, I want one,” Junior chirped when they pull apart, making grabby fingers at Will.

Will obliged with a chuckle and gave the child a noisy kiss on the nose. The toddler scrunched up his face and wiped at his face with his sleeve. There’s a flicker at the corner of Will’s left eye followed by a tingling sensation, a shiver, a breath of air against his neck; though he couldn’t see him, Will felt his specter examine the room for defensible points and possible weapons, just in case.

“You done here?”

Hannibal locked his drawer with a definitive click, “I’m all yours.”

Will took the toddler so the alpha could pull the blinds, collect his coat and suitcase, and close up his office for the weekend. Then they were outside in the cold, talking about the list of gourmet goods that Hannibal had on his must-have shopping list (short), his would-like-to-have list (long), and musing over the possibilities for lunch. Will honestly just wanted a sandwich, preferably one from a Vietnamese bakery as they made the closest thing to the New Orleans sandwiches he lived on for years. Hannibal suggested having lunch at a little charcuterie with an attached cafe that he knew of where both their palates could be satisfied.

His shadow stalked them all the way out of the office and into the street.

It could be any other lunch outing; there was Junior making a mess with the purple crayon on his sketchpad, flirtatious banter as they ate, and more serious discussions about things that Will never thought he’d have to worry about in between sips of *San Pellegrino*; when should they get the gutters cleaned; Micah’s legs were growing fast so perhaps new pants were a good idea; Elizabeta needed to see the dentist in a fortnight, don’t forget; Hannibal had a conference in Chicago in six weeks, starting on Thursday and finishing Saturday, and Will could join him for the weekend – it’s hard to decline when the alpha looked so hopeful.

Perhaps he should have expected it but the casual atmosphere made him lower his guard so eventually, somehow, their conversation wound back to what Will would rather avoid.

“Have you thought about seeing someone for your sleep issues?” Hannibal asked in between sips of mineral water, voice deceptively casual.

"*Sleep is overrated*," he muttered with dark derision, before common sense caught up with him; he glanced up at the alpha, uncertain if he'd hurt the man's feelings but Hannibal just gave him a wry look and selected a stuffed olive from the platter he'd ordered. That silent, almost painfully respectful concern being cast in his direction drew a trickle of guilt from Will; this was his mate trying to care for him, not some clinical probing for information.

"Um, sorry, yes," he exhaled, "I haven't been sleeping well…"

The alpha stared back at him, attentive, waiting.

"I've been having dreams," Will explained, despite the boulder that weighed upon his chest trying to silence him. "It's wasn't – well, at first, it wasn't very frequent…just now and then, you know. But this week, they've just been…constant."

"Unpleasant dreams," Hannibal inferred, spearing a piece of meat. Junior's eyes zoomed in on the dark purple color and immediate held out his hand, his mouth yawning open to make a noise that might have been 'papa' but could just as well have been 'purple'.

"That's putting it mildly," Will muttered and took another bite of his baguette sandwich.

The alpha cut a piece off for the child; Junior opened his mouth obediently for the fork and chewed happily.

"All gone," the child told them sagely, sticking out his tongue to show that his mouth was empty just like he'd seen Micah do, before going back to his scribbling. His parents shared a look of bemusement, and go back to eating their lunch.

"What makes these recent dreams different from the others you've experienced in the past?" Hannibal asked.

Will paused, uncertain how much he should reveal.

Usually when he woke from bad dreams, they'd always slipped away like mist as soon as his feet touched the floor. The dreams in this past week were a different monster altogether; shockingly vivid, they clung to the back of his eyelids and wormed through the mazes of his mind. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw another victim; smelled their blood, heard their last gurgling breathes, felt the hard dent of their ribs against his braced forearms. The worst thing was, he didn't know if they were just figments of his unconscious…or more.

Jack believes that you know who the Butcher is and wants your help to catch him…

That got me thinking; both the Chesapeake Ripper and the Bureau Butcher, they share many signature components to their kills…Ever thought about them getting together?

Will took several slow breaths as his chest rattled from the internal pressure trying to escape. "I guess I've been thinking too hard, or just too much; the dreams, they're old cases, all the best hits of."

"You've been dreaming about the murders you've investigated, with you as the killer."

He looked up, startled.

“You’ve had them before,” the alpha informed him, matter-of-factly, “When you consulted on particularly involving cases, often the re-enactments of the crime scenes would seep into your unconscious.”

Couldn’t you have mentioned this earlier, he wanted to snap – but that was probably considered ‘*leading’* again, and Hannibal had been pretty strict about proceeding carefully from here on out after the last time.

He tried to imagine what that must have been like for the alpha, waking up from his own slumber by a disturbance he couldn’t put a finger on, then realizing that his mate was panting hard and fast in his sleep, sweating, shaking, caught in the throes of ecstasy that came from killing and waking up disorientated, sexually aroused and yet sick to his stomach. It would have been nerve-racking for Hannibal, all his alpha instincts on high alert as his body responded chemically to Will’s fear and hysteria, the coiled-frustration when the alpha found himself unable to quell the enemy that terrified his omega because the enemy was a mirage; he would have counseled and gentled and said all the right things and kept close, but deep down, he would have been unsettled too. Neither would have slept that night.

“Maybe your memories are returning,” the older man continued, lancing another olive.

Will hid the tremor that shot through him. In the corner, his shadow straightened, ears prickling. “What do you mean by *that*?”

“It’s your job,” Hannibal pointed out, nothing at all out of place on his face despite Will’s intense study, “isn’t it?”

There was no fear, no suspicion, just that slight crease of affection at the corner of the alpha’s eyes as he looked at Will and then glanced to the side to check on the toddler, before going back to his lunch. Will stared at his husband’s face, trying to find a tick or crease of doubt; “You spend your days trying to understand killers – you figure out how their motivations were formed, how they chose their victims, and how they carried out their plans. It’s not an easy thing. Despite all you do to prevent it, a little bit of your job will always come home with you.”

He took a deep silent breath as Hannibal gave him a commiserating smile, something small and brimming with tender understanding, and no expectations. “Perception’s a tool that’s pointed at both ends.”

A waitress stopped by their table and asked if he was done.

Will quickly folded his used napkin onto the empty plate and thanked her.

She smiled, friendly enough, but it only became truly genuine when she cleaned up around Junior’s section of the table. The toddler watched her carefully until she’s gone again.

“You sure you’re not writing a book about me,” he was only half-joking; part of him was deadly serious and watching the man carefully for a misstep even though he knew he

wouldn't find one; he didn't know why he kept looking. "According to Freddie Lounds, various anonymous sources have stated that I am *quite the topic* of conversation among *certain psychiatric circles*."

Hannibal paused, expression careful but not defensive, before giving Will that smile, an indulgent curl of the lips that said he thought the younger man was being particularly charming today. It made the omega wonder if they ever argued or griped at one another like regular people, but then he remembered how much he hated even being in the same room during other people's arguments, disliked argumentative people in general. Histrionics bothered him, unsettled some tucked away omega part of him that was always on the look-out for danger; lucky for him then, since Hannibal seemed to believe raising one's voice was against the law or something.

"I would not chose words as my medium," the alpha mused thoughtfully, "And I rather think my interest in you wouldn't be described as…professional."

Will let out an aborted laugh as he flushed – because it seemed Hannibal could turn any conversation into an opportunity for flirtation. It's sweet in a strange way; the openness of Hannibal's desire juxtaposed with his restraint in never being too salacious, like Will couldn't join the dots together when he examined their children's birthdates; that sometimes, his heat cycle hadn't even started up again after the birth of the previous child before he was expecting the next.

By unspoken mutual agreement, they reached for each other's hands and met in the middle, palm to palm. Hannibal's fingers stroked along the mounts of Venus and Jupiter; Will felt the caress tingle up his arm.

Through the arched doorway that led down into the charcuterie, Will saw the elderly store owner raise a pronged cane up to extract something from the dense foliage of fermented sausages that hung down from the ceiling, over the polished tiles and long wooden benches displaying cured legs of deer, boar and calf. An assistant took out a long carving knife and began to slice away at the venison, beautiful long dark slices of salted meat gathered together and artfully piled onto a wooden serving platter.

The blade flashed at him. Dizziness hit Will as the events of the past week crammed into the forefront of his mind, snapping him out of his improving mood. He drew back and curled his arms around himself, suddenly cold.

Hannibal studied him as he unfolded his coat from the spare chair and shrugged it on. "Are you sure it's just poor sleep that's been troubling you?"

For a moment, he wanted to blurt it all out – what Tobias Budge aka the Maestro had implied, the cabin surrounded by woods in Rappahannock County where he liked to go for drives, that his high school shop class project hung over the back door (a mark of ownership as definite as if he'd peed over the doorway), that he'd found tool boxes containing possible (*probable*, his shadow chided) implements used by the Butcher to mutilate his victims (*it wasn't that easy to get your hands on an antique skull saw*) and that there was a barn, as yet unexplored.

It would be nice to tell truth, to be seen. *Nice*, and yet… Will raised his eyes to confirm it for himself, to glimpse it again, that unabashed adoration. He averted his gaze to new diners that had just wandered in; they walked pass and took the table in the far corner.

"You've not been yourself," Hannibal continued.

Will fiddled with his glass; technically, he hadn't been himself for months now.

He swallowed the last of the bubbly mineral water, pausing mid-swallow as a stray thought hit him; perhaps he'd never been himself, perhaps the entire relationship was just a ruse entered into under false premises. But surely Hannibal would have noticed – the man wasn't just book-smart, he was clever, *very clever* – or was love just that blind? Maybe the feelings were genuine despite the false premises; or maybe he didn't know himself as well as he thought he did.

"Will, if you've changed your mind about your work for the BAU and would prefer to only teach–"

"It's not that," he interrupted, scrubbing a hand over his eyes, nose and jaw, "It's just…I get uncomfortable thinking about that stuff," he gestured vaguely, "*All of it*… It seems surreal, when I walk out of the study to eat dinner with the kids – acting like I haven't just spent four-hours figuring out how to abduct, kill and dispose of an insurance clerk without being noticed."

It was probably as close to the truth as he could manage it. The elderly couple from the table next to them glance over at Will in alarm, the old man comically frozen halfway between standing and sitting as they'd been about to leave. He ducked his head, realizing that he probably said that louder than he should have.

As always, with his habit of defying Will's expectations, the alpha didn't allow silence or awkwardness to fester; he stood and rounded the table, hand squeezing over the curve of Will's neck.

"As a species, we're designed to survive," Hannibal told him gently, voice lowered so as to prevent any further public transmissions, "Killing was the first thing our ancestors learned – and it's a good thing too, or you and I would not be here, and lions and wolves would own the earth."

Will craned his neck back to look up at the alpha as strong clever hands stroked over the slopes of his shoulders, thumbs caressing the nape of his neck. Like a well-tuned instrument, he felt himself calm from the gentling. Over in the high chair, Junior glanced at them curiously before going back to his drawing.

"You're not alone in being able to meld the macabre and the mundane," the alpha assured him, voice a soft breathy rumble, "I think you'll find that modern society's tendency to divide them is naive, and I find, somewhat dishonest; our primal instincts were what ensured our survival as a species – lest we be ungrateful."

He could hear Hannibal's tender smile as the alpha leaned to murmur in his ear, "Nature never does anything without a reason; in the days of our ancient fore-bearers, your innate abilities as a profiler would have been a prized skill – you would have sat at Pharaoh's right-hand, separating the rebels from the loyal flock, the liars from the misled – and it continues to be valued, as demonstrated by the *excessive* number of emails you receive from the FBI."

He reached up and caught his husband's hand, squeezing in silent thanks. Then chuckled when the alpha ducked lower to playfully kiss his hand and then his temple.

He's still smiling when Hannibal straightened to pass his credit card to the waitress to settle their bill and gathered up Junior. The toddler, eyelids already starting to droop, raised his arms obligingly despite being interrupted from his drawing and snuggled into his Pater's shoulder, nodding when asked if he was sleepy.

"Shall we?" Hannibal smiled.

Will stood hefting the baby pack over a shoulder and took the offered hand.

There was a platoon of helpers in the kitchen, all in pressed white uniforms.

Will saw them arrive together in a minivan after the two wait staff hired for the night started setting up the dining room; the station cooks were followed by the arrival of the bartender, who was quickly introduced to the cellar, the order of the wines to be served, as well as the spirits trolley she was charged with for the night. Instead of the standard white, the table cloth was a rich dark purple and covered the entirety of the lengthened dining table; there were several wooden serving platters bisecting the stretch of the table, loaded to almost overflowing with winter-themed fruit, decorated with flowers and beetles spun from sugar ("Edible folk art," Hannibal studied the amber-yellow carnation in the light, before handing it to Tomas who gave it a curious lick as Micah looked on almost vibrating in curiosity, "I first came across it when I visited Beijing in the nineties,") and antique copper cutlery.

The guests arrived promptly – apparently Hannibal only tolerated rudeness once before someone was stricken from the invitations forever – and Will's pleased to see Alana and Rob Papparella arrived together, already chatting like old friends. They hit it off with the Prescotts, with Rob finding a fan in Mrs. Mandeville when she arrived, not fashionably late for once with her youngest grandson as her plus one; Nolan Mandeville-Fischer, a seventeen-year old beta who took an instant liking to Will – inexplicably.

Behind the scenes, Marie conducted the kitchen in a classic suit dress of lavender-grey, and occasionally interrupted them to advise that the appetizers were ready for plating in ten-minutes, or that they didn't have enough red caviar to serve it to everyone (Hannibal sent her with instructions for the *poissonnier* to mince *chutoro* sashimi into the caviar to stretch it out) or that Tomas was having difficulty with his bowtie upstairs and was asking for Papa to come fix it.

Just the alpha had promised him, he didn't have to do much as he followed Hannibal on his rounds and mostly let the guests entertain one another. There were, however, only so many variations of 'we heard about the accident – so glad to see you're okay' before he needed a break, no matter how genuine the well-wishes were. Muttering some excuse to Hannibal, he ducked upstairs to check on the children. He found them in the rumpus; Elizabeta was a warrior princess – as well as the director and producer of their play, thank you very much – and Micah was her trusty side-kick, and they were going to rescue the true heir to the throne, Princess Irene, who was also their audience of one. Hannibal Junior was a minion or another random audience member or something, it wasn't really clear; he mostly ran around trying to trip his sister who'd stop and sigh at how silly the baby was, whining for him to stop butting in as she smiled and half-carried half-dragged him back over to his building blocks. Will smiled and went back downstairs.

There's a beautiful intimacy to everything, with the dimmed lights and soft classical track set to loop over the sound system, and while Will had been expecting to be utterly indifferent to the majority of Hannibal's guests, he was pleasantly surprised to find that to be untrue; with his usual thoughtfulness, his husband had tried to invite people whom Will might like and made sure there were a few guests for Tomas to entertain as well.

Along with three old friends from Hannibal's stint in surgery, there was the young artist responsible for the sugar-spun flora and insects in the edible centrepieces, as well as a medieval literature professor from Oxford whom the alpha met in Paris when he was a teen – she had lived for a year in the same apartment building while on exchange at the Sorbonne. She's brought her daughter, Diana, a fourteen-year old beta girl who was reserved and a little uncomfortable until she's introduced to Tomas, who promptly dragged her off to meet Nolan and the other young adult guests.

There was also the Hornbecks, as oddly well-matched as Hannibal and himself – she was an opera singer from Australia, he was a microchip designer from Silicon Valley – whom Hannibal had met at a wine-tasting party held by a mutual acquaintance. The couple had their eyes on a piece of land in Virginia that they planned on turning into a boutique winery and accredited Hannibal with giving them the idea. They didn't know Will very well but oh yes, they'd met ages back hadn't they, at what's her name's fiftieth birthday bash – Hannibal deftly changed the subject before Will could grow uncomfortable by asking the couple if they'd brought their appetites.

The eight-course dinner began promptly at seven; grilled zucchini stuffed with roasted-pumpkin risotto, cut and arranged to look like sushi, with two pieces of pear *nigiri* on the side – pears sliced into small flat rectangles and held together with a bow of prosciutto – which drew delighted chuckles for its playfulness; next was the soup, just plain homemade pumpkin soup with a curving dash of sour cream, pine nuts, broke breadsticks and a few sprigs of chive, evoking an allusion to a Chinese painting in their main corridor; then the fish course, which was caviar served in three polished oyster shells on a bed of ice and frozen tulips. It's all ridiculously good; across and further down the table, Tomas caught his eye and beamed, so pleased to be attending one of Papa's dinner parties at last.

There's an intermission before the next course, and the conversations started up again. Will followed Hannibal into the kitchen to help – Marie made to follow but they assure her it's

fine, that she should keep an eye on their guests instead, especially the teenagers, thank you Marie. Of course, he ended up a spectator when Hannibal took over the plating of the fourth course – wagyu beef grilled then cubed, pierced with glass pipettes of four different sauces, matched with a handroll made with marinated sun-dried eggplant instead of *nori*, filled with wild-rice and beef mince (leftovers from the wagyu) that had been cooked together with bay leaf, onions and exotic spices – it's fairly obvious to Will that he'd probably just get in the way. The alpha had a definite talent with his hands.

"You're staring," Hannibal pointed out.

"Is it distracting you?"

The alpha shot him a suggestive smirk. Will responded with a sardonic eye-roll and refused to rise to the bait and give Hannibal another opportunity for some double entendre; it was okay when it was just them in the study and they could get a little handsy, but there were almost thirty people in the house right now, so just *no*.

"When did you start cooking?"

"When I came here for university and was forced to fend for myself for the first time, since I couldn't pack my uncle's cook into my suitcase," Hannibal admitted with a look of self-deprecating amusement.

Will's mouth curved as he took a sip of his drink.

The alpha picked up a steel bowl filled with some thick dark substance – part of tonight's dessert, Will would guess – and closed his eyes to properly savor the aromas; when he opened his eyes, he gave the woman who had made it a warm smile of appreciation, "There's only so many ways to eat bread, boiled potatoes and ham before one gets bored of the repetition. It was purely practical at first but then I found I had a knack for it, and it became a hobby then gradually, a passion. Plus I find that nothing is so evocative as food – it's so basic and yet stimulates our entire being, able to invoke even the psychological."

On the other counter, one of the hired cooks started distributing the venison loin roast – three slices per plate, to the side – while another carefully placed a sliver of foie gras on each plate, artfully draped over the topmost piece of meat. Hannibal wandered over and picked up a large bowl full of a dark brown sauce that smelt of port and pepper. He dribbled the sauce in wide arcs over the closest plate, leaving the middle of the white space empty and then sprinkled a small amount of delicate green lettuce over the sauce, added two mulberries, and a sliver of crisp pear. In the end, it looked like a wreath, or perhaps one of those circular Chinese silk-screens with embroidered pictures that Will saw last month at the museum.

Hannibal turned to speak quietly with the woman responsible for the fifth course; they joke a little before she nodded with a wry grin and took over the rest of the plating. He then had a few words with one of the waiters, walking him through the next few courses and more importantly, which direction to turn the plate when serving a guest.

The alpha smiled as he surveyed the bustling kitchen before finally turning his attention back to Will.

“You missed your calling.”

“Oh?” The older man located his forgotten glass of wine and took a satisfied sip.

“You should have gone into public relations or politics – you’ve got this way with people.”

“I’m not fond of attention,” Hannibal curled an arm around Will’s waist and drew him away from the main traffic flow in the kitchen.

The omega raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not fond of *that* kind of attention,” Hannibal amended, mischievous.

The laugh caught him by surprise and Will almost spilled his drink. Flustered, he handed over his glass and lifted his right arm up to inspect for damage to his cuff but it’s only over his hand. By the time he’s realized that though, Hannibal was back with a damp towel.

“It’s okay, I didn't get any on me.”

The alpha took his hand anyway and began to clean between his fingers, the way he might for Micah or Junior. Will glanced up at him, bemused by the careful treatment, because he totally knew what Hannibal was up to – he’s right of course, because a moment later, he’s been backed up against the butler pantry door in the hidden corner and they’re kissing like naughty teenagers.

“Hannibal? Where’s the – *oh*!”

They broke apart and Will immediately turned away to hide how red his face was, while Hannibal spun to address the guest who had interrupted them, cool as always.

“Alana,” the alpha greeted, sounding only slightly breathless, “What are you doing here?”

Will glanced over his shoulder; the beta pressed her lips together in a poor attempt to hide her grin, “One of the girls dropped her drink, broke the glass then tried to pick it up and cut herself – Marie’s taking care of her,” she added quickly when both parents tensed on reflex at the idea of a child hurt, “We're trying to clean it up but no napkins and no dust pan.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Hannibal advised them both and left.

Alana Bloom watched the alpha's retreating back, before spinning to face him, grin in place, “I see you’re having a good time.”

Will cocked an eyebrow at her and unlatching the door at his back, descended the winding stairs that led the semi-underground butler’s pantry to get himself a new drink. In keeping with her character, the beta followed him down, wanting to *talk*.

“I met your friend.”

“Which one?”

“Kathy, I like her,” her tone was almost teasing, “She’s a lot of fun.”

Will chuckled under his breath as he located the particular set of goblets they were using tonight and realized that to reach the darn thing – one of the last few left since the rest of the glasses were in circulation upstairs already – he’d need to get the step stool. “She told you that she’d sleep with Laura Hornbeck for her shoes, didn’t she?”

The beta’s mouth slowly segued into a smirk.

“Don’t listen to her,” he warned with half-grin, “she says stuff like that.”

“I like her anyway.”

“She grows on you,” Will admitted as he pulled out the step stool and finally grabbed a glass.

“It’s nice to see you reconnecting with your friends.”

“Don’t get excited,” he drawled with a smile to take the bite out of his words, “I’m still the same.”

Will nudged the step back under the free-standing counter with his foot and pour himself a drink, before easing onto a bar stool and taking a long gulp, still warm from the impromptu make-out session upstairs.

Alana leaned her elbows on the counter as she slid onto the bar stool opposite, “You’re missing the party.”

“So are you,” he countered, and took another sip.

As he topped up his glass in preparation for going back upstairs, he paused at the intense stare that Alana was giving him.

“What?”

“Not drinking alcohol tonight?”

Almost immediately his mood dampened at the reminder. No, he wasn’t drinking tonight and he didn’t have plans to drink for the foreseeable future until he figured out his situation, but most especially, he couldn’t drink tonight. When you had a secret to keep, it was just asking for trouble – *in vino veritas, et cetera*…

“I don’t want to fall asleep halfway through dessert,” he lied with a weak smile, returning the bottle of sparkling apple juice to the fridge. Hannibal hadn’t questioned him when he’d asked for non-alcoholic substitutes, making sure that the bartender knew Will was to be discreetly served sparkling apple juice in place of white wines, and sparkling grape juice in place of red wines; he wondered if the alpha would feel the same way if he knew why Will didn't want to drink tonight.

The beta nodded at his excuse, and then smiling, asked with what was almost a drawl, “No *other* reason?”

Will put down his glass and stared at her, trying to understand what she meant. Alana Bloom beamed, her eyes almost crescents of pleasure. She was in an exceptionally good mood, delighted to be invited tonight to what she saw as a major step forward in Will's normalization process, *then* catching Will and Hannibal in an intimate moment – though she didn't mean to – had just made her evening better than good. She had heard that Will was settling in very well, but to see that the relationship had progressed this much…

Will blinked as he seized upon her meaning.

"I'm not pregnant," he blurted out, probably sounding a lot more alarmed than he actually felt at her *outlandish* inference that him not drinking alcohol must automatically mean he was expecting.

As far as he was concerned, he'd only met Hannibal Lecter three months and nine days ago, and while he was developing feelings for the alpha – strong, *affectionate* feelings – he wasn't ready yet to jump into bed with him, and that was before his world had turned upside down earlier this week.

She shrugged, grin undimmed, "Sorry, just – every time you didn't drink at a dinner party, the next invitation from you guys was a baby shower *so*…" She chuckled, "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

There was a deeply awkward silence between them before Alana cleared her throat, her smile still warm but a little embarrassed now too.

"Come on, let's head back up."

Will nodded and followed her, relieved that they wouldn't have to talk about it. They're just in time to be called to the dining table for the next three courses. Hannibal smiled warmly as he settled back into his seat, and despite other thoughts now warring inside his head, there's an immediate physical reaction to the alpha's presence; Will smiled back before turning to speak to Robert Papparella.

They're almost done with the venison course when the retired FBI agent admitted that he's starting to regret declining Hannibal's dinner invite all those years ago; he would have met Will a couple of years earlier and been eating like this more often.

"Dinner's been incredible," the beta beamed, "You've got to come over to my place for some homemade Italian – it's not going to be as fancy as this but I guarantee you, I make an excellent spaghetti *pomodoro* and my lamb roast smothered in sage and fresh oregano is always a hit – you can bring the kids too, make a night of it."

"That sounds lovely," Hannibal smiled, taking a sip of his wine; when he looked to his mate to check that this was acceptable, he received a smile of affirmation.

"I'm kind of afraid to ask what's next on the menu – what's it gonna be, Doctor Lecter? Flowers made out of sorbet for dessert?"

“Something much simpler I’m afraid,” the alpha paused dramatically, then said with great relish, “*Salad*.”

Robert Papparella laughed.

“Followed by dessert – *sanguinaccio dolce*,” Hannibal continued, before taking another sip of his wine.

“I haven’t had *sanguinaccio dolce* since my last wedding,” Papparella grinned, obviously delighted with the choice.

“What is it?” Kathy asked from across the table.

“Blood and chocolate,” Hannibal smiled, “In this case, the blood of two pigs.”

Kathy Prescott looked intrigued, repulsed and charmed all at once.

“It’s delicious, you’ll love it,” the retired FBI agent reassured her.

“Hopefully,” Hannibal placed his wine glass down to be refilled, “If it’s not to your taste, there will be another course after; seasonal fruits and a selection of soft cheeses.”

“Oh no, I’m trying the pig’s blood – your food is so good, I want to marry it – and besides, I have cousins in Kentucky, I’ve eaten squirrel, I think pig’s blood is probably a step up from that.”

Several people chuckle at her remarks, including Will.

The dinner party finished at midnight, and within minutes, everyone had departed, bellies full, filled with stories to tell about the interesting people they had met and the incredible food they had eaten. Even their younger guests, most of whom had never even known food like this existed much less tried things like caviar, game meat or pig’s blood chocolate pudding, depart in good spirits feeling more worldly than they’d been this afternoon. Tomas hugged both parents as soon as the last guest had gone, feeling accomplished after his first *proper* dinner party, and disappeared upstairs shortly after for bed.

With a professional crew at the house, tidying up was quick and simple and someone else’s job; by the time that Will had checked on the children, paid Irene and seen her off at the door, the kitchen was done and the dining room was also quickly transforming back to what he was used to. Will had gone upstairs to use the shower first while Hannibal finished overseeing the clean-up and locked down the house for the night.

Two hours later, Will jerked awake in bed, his mind whirling with images of manipulated limbs, ropes, pulleys, and a barn. Laying next to his husband of three months, ten days and thirteen missing years, it took a minute for him to work up the courage to go through with it. When he finally made a move, it’s easier than he feared.

(*Kill the silent alarm first*, the shadow instructed)

The omega slipped from between his covers slowly, dropping down onto his knees. He stayed there, forcing himself to breath slowly and quietly as he strained his ears to pick up any signs of movement from his bed partner. After a minute, when he's certain that the alpha was asleep and unlikely to wake, Will crept around their bed and reached under the bedside table to gently tug upon the power plug for the alpha's bedside light.

On his hands and knees by the side of the bed, he stared longingly at the silhouette of the alpha's slumbering form. He didn't have to do it tonight, he could get back into bed, he could sleep burrowed up against Hannibal's back, throw his arm around the man's ribs, they could cuddle, and tomorrow, he could persuade the alpha to make pancakes for breakfast.

Does your husband know about your extracurricular activities? Don't worry… I'm not going to tell anyone what I saw you do – and do well …

Will closed his eyes and took a silent fortifying breath.

(*Leave now*, the shadow whispered, *he's not going to wake up tonight after eating and drinking like that, so you've got a window of opportunity, don't you dare mess this up*)

Opening his eyes, he crept from the room on his hands and knees, and got dressed in the downstairs bathroom by the light of the moon, pulling on the clothes he'd stashed earlier in the laundry hamper. He made sure to set the alarm to re-arm after he's gone, and collected his gun from his safe, replacing his usual cell with a burner. To his relief, none of the dogs stir to the sound of him gently shutting the front door.

The drive took less time without traffic, but it's so dark on the back roads in Rappahannock that Will drove past the hidden driveway twice before finally spotting the exit.

The cabin was exactly as he had left it.

Will set his watch alarm, collected two of the flashlights in the pantry and left, trekking through the underbrush and glancing back towards the cabin to make sure he wasn't veering off course. When he finally reached the barn, he found it old and worn; he could tell that no one had painted the wood for years, and the wide double doors couldn't even close properly, one of the hinges being rusted through.

Under the cover of darkness, Will squeezed between the gap to get inside.

There was a nondescript nineties Toyota sedan that looked like it was on its last legs, a standard white van that any blue-collar small business might own, and a newer vehicle too, a Nissan hatchback in standard blue; all three were covered in a thick layer of dust; he made sure to stay well away from the vehicles, not wanting to leave a mark of his visit.

There's several utility cabinets spread across one wall, holding all the standard stuff like weed-killer and bleach and unused paint, bales of hay that appear more decorative than anything else, old rusted farm tools and a tractor overrun by cobwebs, several empty barrels and two large steel vats probably once used for processing milk, and double-doors covering the entrance to a storm shelter built directly underneath the barn. It's a little unusual, but not completely out of place.

Will pulled open one door, and then the other. The beam of the flashlight showed stairs leading down to packed dirt, more plastic sheeting, and several old pieces of furniture, including a bed and couch. There's a toilet too, in the corner behind a partial partition wall, and a bathtub of all things. He examined the stairs for a moment before stepping cautiously over the threshold –

And onto the surprisingly solid wooden step on the other side.

Setting down the lit torch by entrance so he'd be able to find his way back out, Will switched on the spare and went down.

There's the same row of utility cabinets against the far wall, but when Will opened them, they're filled with tubs of lye. He picked up one of the containers; *Devil's Lye*, it proudly boasted*, Get Your Pipes Unclogged*, and then in small alarming black capital letters – WARNING: POISON.

(*Crude but effective*, his shadow commented, *that only takes care of flesh though, what about the bones? If it was professionally done, sure, you're probably end up with just the residue, but that's hard to pull off at home*)

Will put it back, mouth-dry.

He surveyed the rest of the room. There's nothing else to look at except for the single strand of hair caught in the drain of the bathtub. It was long and a deep honey-blonde. He took out the sandwich bag he'd stuffed into his jacket pocket two days ago and managed to get the hair inside the bag despite having clumsy leather-clad fingers.

He didn't know what to do with it.

The feeling of disorientation and growing desperation for answers grew until he wrenched open the difficult bedside drawer. There's a small wad of envelopes inside, bound together by an over-stretched rubber band. They're fairly recent as there's newspaper clippings of several articles covering the Butcher's last confirmed kills from two and a half years ago, tucked in with several letters.

Most were short, a paragraph at most, and hand-written; but one was typed and longer than the rest. Will held it up in the shaky light.

Hello Professor, the letter began.

As an avid fan of your work, I'm delighted that you have taken an interest in me and grateful for the insights which you've shared.

I have been following your career for awhile now and have a complete collection of your press notices. My admiration has only grown upon discovering your true identity, and the full breadth of your creativity.

I applaud you. To have hidden inside the FBI for all these years takes both skill and cunning. I wonder what would have happened if you hadn't fallen ill – would they have ever suspected

you?

While your deception of the FBI is impressive, it is your recovery of the situation has made me realize the heights of your mastery. Even now the ties which tether you grow slippery with every day your proxy remains free to be your agency in the world.

I am told that you may be free by the end of the month – congratulations.

Though I'm disappointed that he remains a mystery to me, I await with great anticipation for what you have planned next.

It is possibly presumptuous of me. I have things I'd love to show you though I recognize that your abilities far exceeds my own, and my efforts may be mere parlor tricks to you and your associate.

Someday, if circumstances permit, I would like to meet you.

Until then.

Will read the letter once, twice, a third time.

Then he read the other letters, but none of them reveal anything new except that they're sent by different people – one writer referenced Will by name, and congratulated him on a game well-played, that everyone was fooled, including the writer, and another letter offered congratulations on his impending divorce, *oh sorry, it's not called divorce when one party is dead*.

Will forced down the wave of nausea that twisted its way up his abdomen as missing pieces were tossed into the mix, disrupting the half-formed puzzle already there.

His watch beeped.

It took a moment for Will to shake off the stupor and leave the storm shelter, pausing to run a broom over the dirt and delete his tracks. The letters and newspaper clippings were rolled up and crammed into his inner breast pocket; then he squeezed through the crack between the barn doors, checking behind him to collect any fibers left behind, and trekked back to the car.

Will took off his shoes before stepping inside the house, and closed the door with extra care. Then he tiptoed over to deal with the house alarm. With that done, he stuffed his shoes into the cabinet with the other shoes and umbrellas, before creeping upstairs on socked-feet. He would have liked to have taken a shower but there's only enough time to slip back into his t-shirt and house robe, both still stuffed inside the hamper exactly where he'd left them, before he was due for his first appearance of the day.

Just as predicted, Junior was already awake, groggy but upright contemplating his next move. He turned at the sound of his door being pushed open and perked up at the sight of Daddy, holding his arms up to be held.

“Hey, honey,” Will whispered with a smile, and scooped up the little boy.

Junior rubbed at his eyes and gave his omega father a dopey smile.

“Do you need to use the toilet?” He asked, pressing a kiss into the little boy’s tousled hair.

His son nodded sleepily. “Toilet,” he parroted back, and after a thoughtful pause, “Then a cookie.”

Will laughed softly. “Yes to the toilet, *no* to the cookie – it’s too early, baby, how about a banana instead?”

“Okay,” the toddler nodded, and then brightened, asking hopefully, “With pie-nut butter?”

“Peanut butter,” Will corrected, “And yes, you can have that with your banana – and do you want sweet potato too?”

“*Sweet po-tato,*” Junior enthused, and then randomly, “Hello.”

“Hello to you too,” he chuckled, “But you should have said that when I came in –”

Will spun around and froze at the sight of Hannibal in the doorway.

For a split second, his stomach dropped out from under him and his body locked up in terror. But then reason returned. He forced himself to loosen his hold on the toddler, forced himself to take even breaths, and mustered up a small smile; there was no reason for the alpha to suspect him, he’d changed his clothes, he’d brought nothing new into the house (the letters were in his car trunk) he’d brushed the car tires off with a rag to hide the mud, his cell phone was still in his study.

“Hey.”

Hannibal’s face which had been blank shifted, softened almost imperceptibly, “Good morning.”

“Papa, banana and peanut butter!” Junior announced happily.

The alpha’s mouth twitched, “So I heard.”

“Daddy,” the toddler kicked Will in the side lightly, a reminder, “Toilet now.”

“Okay, okay, yes, we’re going,” he replied, and ducked past Hannibal with an apologetic look.

“Coffee?” The alpha called after him.

Will smiled an affirmative and disappeared into the bathroom. By the time they're done, both of them – because the toddler kept hitting his leg to remind Daddy *to go toilet* – and their hands were washed, the rest of the house had already begun to stir.

There's no sign of Tomas being up yet – not a surprise – but Elizabeta was already cheerfully humming in the children's bathroom, and Micah did a drive-by hug of Will's leg before running away to finish putting on his pants. The smell of coffee hit Will as soon as he arrived on the first floor, and he followed it to the kitchen, re-enacting his familiar morning ritual of helping Junior into his high-chair, set up in front of the main kitchen counter for the best views of Papa, and organizing the toddler's food.

Hannibal touched his shoulder and he turned, smiling into the kiss. Instead of the brief embrace he was expecting though, the alpha looped his arms around Will as he began to pull away and nosed at his jugular, scenting him with a long noisy inhale that was almost a sigh.

"You seem tired," Hannibal commented, in that way he did when it was both a question and a statement. "Were the dreams bothering you last night as well?"

Will shrugged, letting the alpha fill in the silence with whatever answer he best liked.

"We'll take it easy today, no thinking about murders or troubled patients," the alpha breathed against his ear, enfolding him tightly. It felt warm in his arms, safe and familiar and comfortable in a way that Will desperately needed. It's an illusion of course, but it didn't make it feel any less real.

Hannibal squeezed his waist playfully, "Shall we have pancakes?"

Will darkly chuckled under his breath, recalling his wish last night. "Pancakes would be nice."

"I think we have some leftover chocolate," Hannibal mused.

"Blood and chocolate?" He pulled back to level a skeptical smile. "What happened to all the leftover fruit? Shouldn't we be using that instead for the pancakes?"

"I believe Elizabeta would like to try some; you know that eventually she'll hear of it and become upset that Tomas has had some but she hasn't."

Will sighed. "What are you going to do one day when Junior tells you that he prefers Wendy's and Panda Express?"

"It will never happen," Hannibal scoffed.

Pressing a final fond kiss into Will's hair, the alpha went to get started on the pancakes.

Elizabeta loved the sweet metallic flavor of the bloody chocolate syrup and asked for more.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the comments and kudos
This was a particularly long chapter. Though technically it's just been one food scene after another (lol forever cos oh Hannibal) a lot has happened - Will's identity is shifting, Will and Hannibal growing closer more intimate and casual, their united front as hosts of a dinner party, the discovery of the letters

I hope I've done alright writing the children - it's hard sometimes, figuring out how they'd express themselves, I have to keep referring to parenting websites to read up on milestones lol
IMHO, Hannibal's got a butler pantry - he's got like two oven and two fridges, he's gonna have another space just for butchering and hanging up legs of meat in cheese cloth for fermenting okay? I think we saw like a glimpse of it in the show but I've gone with something semi-underground, with sloped oneway glass sky-light ceiling, and all the stuff Hannibal might need for practicing his culinary arts. There's possibly a very cleverly hidden second entrance to the kill room...
Also I hope someone had a giggle about Will and Hannibal having a lunch date in a sausage shop, I mean, could I be any more heavy-handed with the phallic imagery ;)
I've actually alluded to 'Ender's Game' - the book not the movie - in one of things that Hannibal said to comfort Will, and also there's a wedding feast allusion for the dinner party, I didn't want to get too heavy-handed so I left out the convo discussing it, but yeah, the two joining families would each buy a pig for the wedding reception, the blood used in the dessert - I guess it's symbolic of melding bloodlines or whatever... that's my guess anyway, I just read somewhere it's a tradition.

天下無難事，只怕有心人

Chapter Summary

A wake-up call, a moment of intimacy, a business lunch and attempted murder.

Chapter Notes

Title is a Chinese idiom meaning "if there's a *will*, there's a way" ;)

In Japan the chestnut fruit symbolizes both difficulties and overcoming them. They are eaten on New Year's day for success and strength the coming year.
Also - thanks to Kyuu :) who helped with the title this time, and cos she got to preview the chapter first, actually gave me feedback about the realism of the distances and times I used for my downtown Baltimore mentions. Thank you very much for putting me right - I really appreciated it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was dark and cold. There was ice spread out before them and gnarled arms of old ghostly trees stretching up over them. In between the barren limbs, he studied his prey through the grand-arched windows of the resplendent house hemmed in by the snow and the night. There was no one else home. No one to call upon. No one to come running. He slid off the beast and un-shouldered the long-range hunting rifle and took aim.

Throat first. *Yes*.

Then the shoulder if his prey withstood that.

The beast's clawed hoofs tore at the snow and dirt beneath them, ready to hunt, ready to gorge.

Will closed one eye, aimed and fired –

Police sirens wailed then clicked off, dousing him in a hot plume of shock.

His eyes fluttered from half-mast as the snow fields, skeletal trees and country mansion disappeared, his adrenaline racketing up to near-panic levels as his eyes snapped open-wide in fear at the patrol car, the deserted streets, the naked black sky.

"Sir," he heard a woman call, "Sir, are you with us? Sir?"

Will instinctively held his arm up to shield himself from the glare of the headlights, almost-hyperventilating as all the other details came into focus. The downtown skyline, the silhouettes of trees, a wide-open intersection, blinking traffic lights, no traffic, no people – shit, where was he?

“Are you lost?” asked the older officer, a dark-skinned beta, bald with a salt-and-pepper mustache and a permanent pinch between his brows from too much frowning; the man gestured for his partner to go switch off the headlights when he noticed the omega’s grimace.

“Are you okay?”

“What?” Will stumbled as he whirled around, trying to figure out where he was and – his right hand ached, why was it aching?

“Do you know where you are?”

He swallowed dryly, “Baltimore,” he whispered, hoping desperately that he was right. *Please. Please be right.*

“What’s your name? Do you need a ride to the hospital?”

Will’s eyes went to the officer’s hand was on his belt, resting near the handle of his baton. He wasn't a cop though, just a campus security officer going by his uniform. Which meant that he must be near Johns Hopkins.

“Will…Will Graham – Graham-Lecter,” he managed to get out, voice a feeble trembling croak, “No, no hospital…I’m cold.”

“Okay, Will – may I call you that? My colleague here is going to come over and give you a blanket. Do you think you can put that down?”

Will flinched as he glanced down; his right hand was clutching the handle of the meat tenderizer. He forced his frozen digits to unlock and wrapped his arms around him, convulsing as the sting of the cold suddenly increased and the soles of his feet twinged with numbed sensation.

“There you go,” A young beta female, the aforementioned colleague, wrapped a standard emergency blanket around his shoulder, shifting onto her toes to reach properly. Will ignored the fact that she kicked the kitchen implement away and out of reach.

“Thank you…” he whispered, grabbing at the scratchy fabric and burrowing in.

“Is he yours?” She asked.

Will’s brows flexed in confusion but cleared when he followed her gaze.

Winston looked at the campus patrol officers before looking back up at him, making a small snuffing noise as he slunk to the left and then the right, before settling back into the same spot, alert but patiently anticipating his owner’s next move.

“Hey Winston,” he chuckled weakly, and held out his hand.

The dog came and nudged against his stiff fingers.

It’s pretty obvious now what’s happened. He allowed himself to be led to the police car but refused to get into the back, not sure he could stand to be in a place that was essentially a cage. He half-leaned against the open door as the two looked down at him, solemn.

“Have you been drinking?” The older officer asked, mildly concerned and yet his brain was already somewhere else, at the twenty-four hour diner on the next block with the good pies and the alright-coffee; the beta felt like he’d seen this before – this wasn’t the first omega he’d seen wandering the streets, happened sometimes didn’t it? During extreme stress and sometimes difficult pregnancies, right? He’d attended a seminar about this some time back...

“Mister Graham-Lecter,” the female beta tried again when he didn’t respond, “Have you been drinking?”

Will shook his head; he’s sworn off alcohol for the time being.

“Drugs?” She asked. “Are you on any medications?”

He wanted to laugh because for once, he hadn’t even touched aspirin, not when he had an alpha to sooth it all away. Then he recalled that sleepwalking had been one of the symptoms last time. He shook his head in answer, frightened.

(*Will you put them through that again? Last time you were lucky, but this time they won’t be quiet about it – they’ll blast your name to the heavens so that everyone knows. Your mate and children will be forced to leave everything behind and live the rest of their lives in anonymity – you will never see them again, and they will never see you again, for you’ll be given the death sentence, do you understand? Do YOU UNDERSTAND?*)

Will flinched when Winston’s wet nose butted into his bare knee.

“Do you want us to call someone?”

“Yeah…” he nodded shakily, tittering on the edge, “My husband.”

He rattled off the number and the security officer walked away to make the call.

The beta female crouched down. “Are you sure you’re okay?” She asked him softly.

Will nodded, too disorientated to even consider the irony of her question; he wasn’t even sure who the hell he was, much less if he was alright.

“Is there anything else going on?” She asked, almost at a whisper.

He raised his gaze from his muddied toes to glance at her, curious at the inflection in her voice.

The older man came back, “We’re gonna wait with you, Will. Your husband said he’ll be here shortly.”

Will nodded gratefully and suffered a twinge of guilt when literally, five-minutes later, the Bentley was pulling up in front of the patrol car, parking haphazardly; the alpha must have been out of the house, searching for him. Hannibal emerged in the most mismatched outfit that Will had ever seen on him; the alpha had proper pants on (heaven forbid if Hannibal Lecter left the house without proper pants) but hadn’t bothered to change out of his sleeping shirt and had obviously thrown on the first coat he found, in this case, the beige one he’d worn yesterday.

Standing up despite his aching feet, Will left the blanket behind to stumble into the alpha’s arms.

“Are you hurt? What happened?” Hannibal demanded, barely a tremor above his usual rolling cadence but Will heard his worry in the slightly-faster breaths he took, saw the way the lines on under his eyes seemed to deepen.

He shook his head and shamelessly slipped his cold hands under the alpha’s coat to grab at the back of his shirt. His mate’s mouth twitched despite his strained expression and held him closer, hand squeezing over his neck. Will closed his eyes as he let himself be lulled by scent of his alpha.

“You’re frozen,” Hannibal breathed, pulling away despite his omega’s soft protest to removed his coat and firmly wrap it around Will’s shoulders.

“Good evening, sir, you are…?”

“Yes,” he heard Hannibal say, “Thank you, you have no idea how worried I’ve been.”

“That’s alright, Doctor; we found your husband sleepwalking on the side-walk, about to cross the intersection. I don’t know if this is something that regularly happens but you might need to take him to see his doctor, get it looked into.”

“Yes, yes of course.”

There were a few more lines parried to and fro but Will could hear that the older security officer had already written off the incident as a temporary inconvenience, and something he wouldn’t have to get the cops involved in, which was always such a hassle. Hannibal asked for the man’s details. The female officer wasn’t as easy to reassure, and she asked several more questions, making sure to take a note of their names and address, then handed over the meat tenderizer with a little awkwardness. Will would be offended on Hannibal’s behalf at her suspicion but he knew how hard it was to understand the bond between a well-matched alpha and omega; that he could never imagine trusting Hannibal as much as he did now because all his life, living among betas, that kind of trust had seemed fatal.

To set her mind at ease, he peeked out from where he’d almost burrowed into Hannibal’s side and gave her a weary smile of gratitude as he was led away to the car. She smiled back, heart a little lighter.

Hannibal didn’t speak but his actions screamed his distress as he bundled Will into the passenger side, showered Winston with praise before letting him into the Bentley which was usually emphatically off-limits to the dogs, and drove home with more care than usual, checking on his omega at every intersection.

It’s only when they pause to turn at a set of traffic lights that Will realized where he had been; that he had been stopped on the route he'd been avidly studying all evening, trying to figure out the travel times and possible routes between the nearest police stations to various places in downtown Baltimore; that he had been on his way to *Chordophone String Shop*, with a meat tenderizer in his hand.

Irene opened the door when they arrived home. She smiled warmly as Hannibal helped him inside, Winston following at their heels, but he saw the strain behind the relief. She didn’t mind being woken up and called over to watch the children in an emergency – it happened rarely and she was always well-compensated. But she was a nice girl, and she was worried about Will, both as a budding psychologist herself and as an acquaintance of the family. She left after getting Winston settled.

Will showered as directed, before letting himself be tucked into bed with tea, to have his feet examined by Hannibal under a magnifier and a reading lamp dragged over from the desk in the corner. There’s some scrapes, some bruising but little other damage – some ointment would do but Hannibal was worried about infection and intended to keep an eye on things, maybe a course of preventative antibiotics? Will would roll his eyes if he didn’t feel the slow lingering pressure of guilt upon his throat, because the silent alarm hadn’t gone off – Hannibal considered it bad luck that the power plug had come loose. The omega didn’t correct him.

“I’m sorry it’s so late,” he muttered at some point.

“Office hours are for patients; my time is always yours,” Hannibal replied instantly, mouth curling at the corners to give a tired smile. He switched off the floor lamp and shifted it out of the way, tucking his omega’s left foot back under the covers.

“Will,” the alpha began, solemn, “Tell me the truth – have you been sleeping at all?”

He exhaled and rubbed hand across his forehead, “I’ve slept…some.”

Not really.

(His specter mocked him – *if you’d just killed Tobias Budge already*…)

When he wasn’t weathering night terrors, his brain flung itself in circles around the varied ways that he could get rid of Tobias Budge without implicating himself or giving the beta any

opportunities for revealing what he knew, as well as occupying himself with studying the Ripper files, because Crawford was onto something.

He wasn't alone, he was never alone - someone was beside him in the dark...

And since he'd also sworn off alcohol, there wasn't even anything to take the edge of the constant barrage in his head; maybe he should go back to self-medicating with whiskey before bed, right before flossing and moisturizing. That would be a nice advert, he thought wryly – a whiskey before bed keeps the bed bugs away. Will shivered as the alpha cupped his face and studied him intently. The gentleness of the touch made him weak.

"I know someone, a colleague from my days in the ER, who now works in neurology," Hannibal said quietly, "I can make some calls in the morning; I'm sure he'll be able to fit you in."

"It's nothing," he mumbled, averting his eyes as he took in a trembling breath; "I'm fine, seriously, just a lot of stuff, work, things."

"*Will*."

"It's *not* a *seizure*," he whispered it like it was a dirty word. Considering the heartache that his encephalitis had caused the alpha and their family, it probably was a dirty word.

There was a little noise; the alpha wetting his mouth, contemplating what he needed to avoid saying, so as to not upset his omega further – it was as endearing as it was painful, because he felt so undeserving of it.

"The onset of sleepwalking in adulthood is less common than in children, but for omegas, it has been known to happen in times of extreme mental and emotional stress, or pregnancy."

Will nodded slowly, listening.

"I'm not going to insult you by asking if there's someone else."

He chuckled tiredly – but then stopped, because he realized that Hannibal was semi-serious despite his light tone. He felt an urge to declare that that was ridiculous, he'd *never* do such a thing – and weren't mated omegas biochemically compelled to be loyal to their alphas? There was a decidedly possessive stroke along his covered shin, the caress managing to penetrate the blanket and travel up his leg to curl through his stomach; *I know that you're not with child*, the touch declared.

"Are you stressed, Will?"

Haltingly, he nodded; that was the simplest explanation, and the easiest one to hold up as the truth.

"Come to bed?" He asked, voice a low rasp, beyond exhausted.

For a second it seemed that the alpha was about to protest, but then Hannibal exhaled and rounded the bed to slip under the covers. Will rolled over to face him, and almost sighed as

their bodies gravitated towards one another, his head finding its familiar spot in the juncture between the alpha's arm, shoulder and breast bone. The older man cupped his face and tilted up his head.

"We have been so busy," the alpha murmured, breath hot on Will's cheek, "I'm sorry for not giving you the attention you need."

"It's not you," he said, mouth-dry, "Really."

Their foreheads touched as the alpha closed his eyes, tired, before shifting to rub his nose over the stretch of skin just under his omega's ear, hand tight over the nape of Will's neck and the curve of Will's skull.

"I could return to a part-time schedule, to be home more."

Will shook his head, huffing against the alpha's clavicle. "Please don't."

"Money is not an issue."

Yes, he chuckled bitterly under his breath, between the payout from the FBI for wrongful imprisonment, plus the settlement for deliberate negligence from the Sutcliffe estate's liability insurance, they could probably retire in a few year's time, since they also had Hannibal's inheritance from his late uncle's estate, their joint savings and on top of everything else, the family assets returned to the alpha as the sole Lecter heir after the Soviet Union had been dissolved. To say they were fairly well off was an understatement in Will's opinion. But the last thing he wanted right now was more scrutiny from the one person most likely to figure out his secret.

"Please," he said, pulling away entirely when the alpha tried to broach the topic again, "Please, just…just don't – *don't* change your schedule for me."

"I should be here."

Will shook his head. "No," he said emphatically, "No, Hannibal, *no*, I don't need you to be here, okay."

He knew it was the wrong thing to say, an insult to any alpha, and an apology was on his mouth immediately as the full implications of his words hit him.

Hannibal pulled away to regard him with a terrifying lack of expression; "You can't ask me to ignore what happened tonight."

This time, it was Will who leaned to slump against the alpha's chest, leaning up to scent the alpha's neck, to nuzzle and mouth at the pulse, indulging in all those omega urges that he'd always held himself back from, always shying away from exposure, wary of being this needy creature.

"No, no, of course not…" he whispered in between the nuzzling, ashamed.

The alpha tilted his head back with a noise deep in his throat, accepting the apology.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured into the quiet, “If you wish to end your consultation agreement with the BAU or even stop working for a time, you’re free to do so – you could finish your doctorate, you could even quit if that’s what you desire; it is not unusual for an omega with young children to resign, no one will think less of you for it.”

The latter option was starting to look more and more attractive with each sleepless day that passed, but considering everything that was going on, his intimate knowledge of the BAU and his connections at Quantico were going to his biggest advantages in getting rid of Budge and keeping his secret hidden.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, “Can we just go to sleep please?”

Hannibal took a deep exasperated breath but kissed his omega on the forehead before pulling the covers tightly over the younger man’s shoulders. Will closed his eyes, just wanting to the morning to come already so he could just fall into routine and forget this entire night.

The alpha switched off the bedside lamp. In the darkness, without his husband looking at him, he found it a little bit easier to pretend that his deception was the truth.

“I take my responsibilities towards you very seriously,” Hannibal whispered, a hand carding through his omega’s hair.

“You’re not responsible for me,” Will retorted gently, exasperated. He started to roll away but the alpha grabbed him by the shoulder, arms coming up to wrap around him. He relented and sank into the embrace.

“I just don’t want to talk about it,” he whispered, “I just want things to be normal.”

“You must talk to someone.”

Yes, someone who wasn’t Hannibal.

“Stress does terrible things to the human body,” the alpha continued, with an undertone of worry.

Yes, it wasn’t noticeable now but if this kept up, in another week or two, Will would begin to lose weight – because he’ll lose the urge to eat, his stomach having trouble digesting anything except liquids, his nervous system reacting to his fear by signalling the shutdown of all ‘non-essential’ functions to the fight/flight/freeze response, so all energy in his body could be devoted towards functions useful for evading or defeating his enemies. It was the same adrenalin experienced by all human beings – a genetic gift of their progenitors, Hannibal would call it – but doubled and even tripled, courtesy of his omega dynamic.

“Can’t I just talk to you?”

“Always,” the alpha assured him, almost painfully earnest, “but I think in this case, an objective point of view could be useful.”

Will chuckled against the man’s chest, too weary and guilty to put up a protest; he could hear where this was going.

“You want me to see a *psychiatrist*.”

There was a wet little noise of lips pursing tentatively.

“It may help.”

“I *hate* psychiatrists.”

There was a pause and then a lighthearted, “I hope you don’t feel that way about me.”

A swell of something delicate and indefinable burst into being within him, and Will had to squeeze his eyes shut to hold back the sob that wanted to come out with the soft laugh he gave.

“Stop fishing for compliments,” he whispered fondly.

The kiss pressed to his hair was mischievous in mood.

For a minute there was just the sound of them breathing together in the darkness, and a faint echo of traffic from somewhere very far off that might have been a trick of the imagination. In the bathroom, a trickle of water suddenly found enough momentum through cohesion to fall through the sink hole, the noise of it chasing itself down into the pipes thin and sudden and just as quickly silenced.

“I’ll see someone, but I can quit anytime I want,” he relented.

Hannibal breathed deeply, and Will knew that he’d made the right choice, that the alpha was comforted by the idea that his omega would be cared for by a professional, “I have someone in mind. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

Will nodded and took a deep lungful of his husband’s scent, the whiff of smoke and ash, that indefinable undertone of alpha, and a hint of something exotic overlaid with the sweet natural fragrance of the soap they used. He let the scent sink into him, let his brain light up in reaction, a complete microcosm of associations flaring to life; a frisson of desire zinged through him despite his total and utter exhaustion.

He burrowed his face into Hannibal’s chest and drifted.

“I’ve never had therapy while having dim sims before.”

Bedelia Du Maurier settled in her seat before fixing her cool gaze upon him, mouth quirked. “As I no longer have an office and you preferred somewhere impersonal, I’m afraid our options for privacy was either this or a hotel room – and the latter does tend to send the wrong message to anyone who sees us together.”

When Hannibal told him that the colleague he had in mind for Will's therapy was her, he'd been surprised since there had been a moment of contention between the two alphas when they last met at the Freer Gallery; he'd been certain that his husband would want nothing to do with the woman. His hesitation had increased upon finding out Hannibal had been a patient of hers too, until he realized that it didn't matter who the psychiatrist was.

He wasn't here for therapy; he was here to be a *good* mate and console his fretting alpha that there was nothing to worry about. *This* was a *show*. Him, her, the Chinese restaurant with its vegetarian lunch menu, blood-red carpets and tacky statuettes of phoenixes and tigers. And here was the stage; this private banquet room that they'd been given the use of due to Du Maurier's longstanding patronage.

"The option was available for a house visit, but I think this is a suitable compromise, don't you think?"

Will nodded. He had tried not to make it obvious but the last thing he wanted was to have this happen in the house; they'd probably use the study, where he spent the majority of his time working on *his problem*, and she'd probably sit in Hannibal's chair, which frankly he felt possessive over on the alpha's behalf. It was all a bit too intimate.

"How would this work?" He asked as she opened her menu, crossing her legs in a pose of indolent lassitude.

The table seated twelve and was empty except for their two places, adjacent to one another but not next to each other. The psychiatrist glanced at him from over the woven-hardback menu in deep magenta.

"You're colleagues with Hannibal," he pointed out, and then, "He used to be your patient."

"There's no conflict on my part;" the alpha female advised him, voice light, "Unorthodox yes but not unheard of; my objectivity is not threatened by our brief acquaintance – unless that's an issue for you?"

No, but it made Will curious. How long had Bedelia Du Maurier known Hannibal? How long had she seen him as a patient? Had it been before the two of them had even met? After Hannibal and he had mated? Did she know the intimate details of his life through the alpha's lenses? Why did she retire? He felt a small trickle of resentment for the woman, that she should know more about his mate than he did.

"You are my patient," She continued, "Just as Hannibal was – outside of our sessions, we will not see each other, we will not socialize, and if you are concerned about confidentiality, I assure you, your husband won't be privy to anything you might reveal."

Will studied her placid face, her smile showing just the right amount of professional friendliness. Her pale eyes flicked away, back to her menu. "The *Minced Chestnut Buns* are very good."

"I have my eyes on the *Mixed Mushroom Garden with Broth-Broiled Tofu*."

Her mouth creased in a half-smile, “One of my favorites. Shall we share?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer before an elderly waiter was there to take their orders. Bedelia Du Maurier ordered for the both of them, throwing in a ‘*Root vegetable hotpot cooked in cumin*’ without consulting him; rice for two, naturally, and she would prefer they skipped on the ginger in the dishes, thank you. The waiter beamed at her – must be a good tipper, Will thought – and disappeared, making sure to close the door firmly behind him to give them privacy.

“Where should we begin?” He asked.

“We begin with why you’re here.”

Will chuckled because that question was as easy as it was complicated. “I’m *here* because my husband is worried and this will make him feel better.”

“So you’re here out of obligation?”

He gestured vaguely, knowing that he was being wildly sarcastic now. “Is that wrong?”

The psychiatrist’s mouth segued into a slow smile, her mask almost impeccably blank; “Therapy works better when the patient wishes to be here.”

“Therapy doesn’t work on me,” he muttered around a sip of the complimentary tea they’d been served. It’s chrysanthemum, and the sharp bite hidden behind its fragrance tickled at his nostrils; “I know all the tricks.”

There’s a pause of bemusement but no posturing, no pricked ego, no attempt to *correct* him, the *plebeian*. Bedelia Du Maurier picked up her chopsticks with practiced grace and delicately selected a salted peanut from the small dishes of snacks they’d been provided.

“Thank you for your honesty."

“Yeah, well, you might be taking that back later,” he muttered under his breath. “Look I don’t really want to be here…”

Du Maurier cocked her head to the side, sensing the coming *but*.

“I don't want to be here *but*,” Will continued, inhaling sharply, “I have realized that I need to talk about what’s going on,” in the most vague sense of the notion, “and Hannibal suggested you.”

The blond’s smile became dry before dissipating entirely, “I suppose from him, that’s a compliment.”

The omega hid his frown; this was the second-time that there had been a slight hint of some disagreement between the female alpha and Hannibal, and this time, there wasn’t an excuse of jealousy to explain it away. Will wondered vaguely what that was all about.

A waiter knocked and entered with their food. The door drifted open behind him, unleashing the dull roar of the lunchtime crowd who dominated the main dining area. The young college-aged server placed Will's spoon and fork down, tightly-wrapped by a deep red napkin. They were served the hot pot and the tofu mushroom dish, then advised that the chestnut buns were being steamed and would arrive shortly.

The door to the private dining room clicked close again, sealing out the noise.

For an entire minute, they ate in silence.

"I thought you were retired."

"I am."

"Then…?" He frowned.

She gave him a thoughtful look, "Hannibal is a colleague of mine that I am fond of; when he asked me to take you on as a patient, I accepted it as a favor to him."

"You don't consider him a friend?"

She arched a lofty well-groomed eyebrow at him, her smile good-humored as she replied with refreshing honesty, "No."

Will scrutinized the female alpha as she went back to eating her lunch, with a neatness and elegance that he didn't think was possible with chopsticks; only one other person could probably equal her, and that was Hannibal. There was almost something contemptuous that had glimmered through the professional mask she wore at his mention of her being friends with his mate, and Will would be offended on his husband's behalf, except he also got the impression that she actually did like the alpha. It was all around strange. Will pondered at the dynamic between these two before putting it out of his head as he had bigger fish to fry.

"Tell me," the psychiatrist broached, taking a sip of tea, "Why do you feel obligated?"

How could he not be obligated? He had put everyone through the grinder once, he wasn't about to let it happen again; and he couldn't reassure Hannibal that everything was fine, couldn't explain the issue of Tobias Budge's loose lips would be sealed by the week's end because he was going to seal it, so the only way he could comfort the alpha was to attend therapy, like a responsible *sane* adult.

"How much do you know?" He asked, wary.

"Enough," she answered without answering, and then clarified at his side-eye, "I've been given access to your discharge papers from the hospital, a complete medical history from your GP and a referral from Doctor Parrish. I also have my knowledge of you as Hannibal's therapist."

Then she knew plenty, more than he did probably, at least about the parts of his life that were safe for public consumption.

“You only saw Doctor Parrish twice,” she pointed out.

“I wasn’t comfortable with him.”

She gave him a curious half-smile. “Does this aversion extend to all doctors or only psychiatrists?”

“More or less,” he replied, passive-aggressive.

She regarded him with bemusement and finished another piece of tofu before asking with an almost jarring bluntness, “Why?”

“I’m sure Hannibal’s mentioned it.”

Bedelia Du Maurier smiled, professional to the end even as she dabbed at her lips and reached for more tea. “Not really.”

“I’m not fond of being psychoanalyzed.”

She gave a slight tilt of her head, expressing her amusement at the irony of his statement with clarity despite her perfectly placid face. “I am told that you teach a class on psychoanalysis though, and that you are often called upon to profile the criminally insane.”

“Yes,” he said shortly, “And I never like what I see, do I?”

The psychiatrist smiled faintly, but her eyes were fastened upon his face with a strange intensity, “No, I guess you wouldn’t – but then, you may be looking in the wrong direction.”

Will’s brows came together, uncertain at the conflict between what she was saying and the tone of voice she had used, before his train of thought was derailed by a sharp rap on the door.

The elderly waiter who initially took their orders bustled in with a bamboo steamer, which he presented with a grin and a chuckle for Du Maurier who thanked him warmly. He left quickly, in a hurry to get back to the other customers.

“Indulge me on this if you will – why therapy, when you’re clearly uncomfortable with the notion?”

He nodded thanks as she served him one of the buns.

“I told you; it’s to set Hannibal’s mind at ease.”

“And perhaps yours as well,” she suggested.

Will studied her before allowing himself to nod, because yes, he supposed to some degree she was right.

This morning, Hannibal had cancelled on his morning clients to go with him to the hospital. He’d almost started shaking in the waiting room despite knowing the cause of his recent

issues. His brain had hit upon the idea that perhaps there was something faulty with him beyond the usual crazy and he just couldn't tell the difference, and had refused to put the thought down, tormenting him with the bleak possibilities. The alpha had held his hand throughout the nerve-racking twenty minutes they waited, and afterwards, had kept him from cracking by the sheer force of his presence. He gentled Will, never letting go of his hand or shoulder, and finally gave that tour of his office library, doing his best to distract his mate with more pleasant thoughts. He hadn't thought it would work, but he'd underestimated Hannibal's charm and cleverness.

"Did you ever sleepwalk in childhood?"

"Once," he admitted; it had happened at the onset of puberty, when he'd confirmed the general consensus regarding his dynamic; the doctor had said it was stress from his change and recommended a few changes to his bedroom to help – it had worked and he'd never thought about the incident again. "But never after that except when I had Galinthy's…"

There was silence as they both concentrated on their lunch.

"And it wasn't a seizure?"

Will shook his head, kept his face lowered as he pretended to be engrossed with the food to avoid having her see his unease. "We're waiting on blood tests but so far, no, doesn't look like a relapse."

"Considering your medical history, you have reason to be concerned."

Grudgingly he nodded. He wasn't sure at first if he was relieved that she wasn't coddling him, or unsettled by the clinical detachment she displayed towards all that had happened – and settled on ambivalence.

"Even if this turns out to be stress-induced, the re-emergence of your nocturnal habits must be an unpleasant reminder."

Bedelia Du Maurier leaned back in her seat, and picked up the teapot to refill their cups. She fixed him with an expectant gaze; the omega within him felt compelled to appease, just as the alpha within her awaited a satisfactory response.

"Makes me feel out of control," he admitted, the words rasping out of him.

She took a breath, voice light despite her small frown, "And control is important to you."

"Yes," he said, mouth-dry.

Hannibal never said it, *never even thought it*, but the thought had cross Will's mind more than once; that someone would look past the shields that the alpha had set up around him and brand the omega as 'too unstable' to look after his own children; that even if he managed to get rid of Budge, he would lose them all anyway, Hannibal too.

In the background, Bedelia Du Maurier finished her tea and poured herself another cup.

“Aren’t you going to ask about my parents? If I have any siblings?”

“No,” she replied succinctly, wry.

That gave him pause, and he smiled, recalling Hannibal’s comment that she was unconventional, before remembering that he shouldn’t give her any ideas. “Why not?”

She cocked her head to the side, “You’re here to provide your husband with a sense of security, that he has *done his bit*, which I’m willing to accommodate. And if you would rather we simply finish our lunch and stop speaking there, I will comply; I am a psychiatrist, Mister Graham-Lecter, not an interrogator.”

A dubious snort escaped him, “That’s usually blurred in my line of work.”

Her smile was a blend of amusement and professional distance; she wasn’t mocking him though, no, she *liked* him. “How would you describe your relationship with your husband?”

He took a deep breath, because that was a loaded question as any. “I am… protective of him.”

She raised a manicured eyebrow, “Some people would say that it is the role of the alpha to be the protector.”

“And I say that these people have never been stabbed in the back – sorry, are we onto the getting-to-know-you part of the session now?”

The female alpha gave him a piercing look but didn’t allow his little aside to distract her. “Do you usually experience the need to take your safety – physical or otherwise – into your own hands?”

“My parents were betas,” he said without explaining, letting her fill in the blankets.

“Having beta parents doesn’t explain why you feel the urge to protect your alpha,” she gave him a pointed half-smile, “I’ve known Hannibal long enough as a colleague to say without infringing upon our doctor-patient confidentiality that he can look after himself.”

He didn’t respond to her provocation, unable to tell the truth and sensing that she would know if he lied. After a long moment, Bedelia Du Maurier checked her wristwatch and picked up her chopsticks again to resume eating lunch. She seemed utterly indifferent to whether or not he answered her. Hannibal did it too, he realized, this nonchalance; it was a surprisingly effective method of disarming him.

“I want to him to be okay.”

The woman raised her arctic gaze, mildly curious as she finished chewing before noting, “He sent you to me as part of his duty of care as your alpha.”

Will chuckled as he avoided her eyes, staring down at his bowl instead. “Then I guess we’re taking care of each other.”

She smiled, but not in the way that Alana might smile, charmed by the admission. No, it was impersonal, an act of distancing herself from the need to respond.

“If you wish, I can prescribe something to help you sleep.”

“Thanks but I prefer to keep a clear head.”

“In that case, I recommend trying to relax more either through massage or taking a bath, perhaps some light recreational reading an hour before bed,” the alpha’s smile became self-deprecating, “Or as I prefer, a glass of wine.”

“Self-medicating, Doctor Du Maurier?” He raised an eyebrow, bemused.

Her mouth quirked; “Physician,” she quoted with a touch of bite, “heal thyself.”

Will deliberated several times over the gun in his safe before deciding that bringing it would be suspicious. He might be able to play it off as precaution but it would still make him suspect; besides, the ballistics would come back to him, and if his plan went accordingly, he was better off using something on the scene. He did take his gloves, made sure to have a back-up phone on him, and deliberately wore flattering colors – no one ever liked to talk about it, but an omega could literally get away with murder if they were attractive.

He made sure to park on the same side of the street, made sure that he had Beverly’s number on speed dial, and then went inside.

Just like his last visit, the bell above the door rang.

Within moments, his appointment was standing in the arched doorframe to the other rooms.

Will gave a small greeting nod, outwardly calm even as his heart thumped. “I’ve decided to surprise Tomas at school today.”

Tobias Budge gave him a bland smile. “I’ll be with you shortly – I’m just with a student.”

“Of course."

Will slowly surveyed the interior perimeter of the renovated *Chordophone String Shop* as the beta finished up the lesson; he noted the almost-complete muting of ambient sounds – the magic of the new glass in the windows – and the heavy curtains that now hung ready to be drawn, to shroud the shop from prying eyes. The large heavy oak table set up as a mock workshop from last time now looked the part, with another antique table added, a spinning stool and several directional table lamps, as well as the scattered disarray that one would associate with a luthier.

In the background, Tobias Budge made small talk regarding his student's plans for spring break, organized for another lesson next week before shutting the door and throwing the lock. He removed the plain OPEN sign from the window, replacing it with one that announced cheerfully in bright lipstick-red BACK IN 15 MIN.

“Has your husband released you for the day?” The beta asked when he finally turned to face his visitor, “Or doesn’t he know?”

There was an insult in that somewhere and Will narrowed his eyes at Budge to show that he didn’t find it funny.

“The cello?” He asked pointedly.

“Yes, of course.”

Tobias Budge brushed past, disappearing out of the view to where his workshop-area was in the inner parlor and appeared moments later with the instrument, already in the brand-new case that Hannibal had bought for their son. Will popped the latch once it was placed upon the front counter, running his eyes along the body, individualized pegs and custom tail spike, before closing it.

“Is it to your satisfaction?”

Will raised his gaze to meet the beta’s stare, “My specialty isn’t cellos.”

Budge slowly smiled, friendly enough but there was an edge behind it. “I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here today.”

He shrugged, nonchalant. “Baltimore is a small town; sooner or later, we would have met.”

“Are you here to negotiate then?” The man seemed amused.

The omega arched a supercilious eyebrow.

Budge returned it, “Are we going to draw borderlines, Mister Graham-Lecter? You have your slice, and I have mine?”

“No.”

The beta’s brows furrowed before flattening out again; he was intrigued. “Then what prompted you to grace me with the pleasure of your company today?”

Will took his time to answer, wandering over to the Mozart bust statuette which had been shifted now onto a sideboard. It’s a calculated risk, showing his back to the beta; he tucked his hands into his coat pocket in a show of casual ease. “I wanted some company,” he admitted, keeping his voice low and demure as to mimic calm while in reality, his pulse raced, “to be able to be honest with someone who shares my hobbies, sees the world as I do.”

When he glanced over, Tobias Budge was smiling.

“What made you change your mind?”

He raised his eyebrows, “What makes you think that I did?”

He’s confused Tobias Budge. Good. The beta tried to hide his reactions but the twitch of his left eyebrow gave him away – he was as confused as he was further intrigued by Will. His reputation must precede him, because he could see the moment that the Maestro wrote it off as a quirk, that the omega was exempt from the mundane due to his brilliance just as musical prodigies must be excused their idiosyncrasies.

“I’m sorry, if I seemed intrusive – if I stepped on any toes-”

“You were…you did,” Will smiled thinly to show no hard feelings, “*Don’t* come to the house again.”

Or else.

Tobias Budge stared at him for a long tense second before nodding once, to show that he understood.

Will’s right hand, hidden within his deep coat pockets, reached at a snail's pace for his phone and sent off the prewritten text to Beverly Katz. He flicked the cell to silent-mode. He knew it would ring soon, with a frantic Beverly demanding to know what he meant by that, was he serious, OH *dammit*, hang on Graham, we’re coming, *we’re coming*. It was going to ring and he was going to ignore it.

“Would you like to stay for coffee?” The beta asked genially, his smile almost warm now.

“Only if you show me your basement.”

The surprise was a momentary flicker and replaced quickly by quiet delight – the man was impressed.

“How long do you have?”

“I have time,” he met the smile with one of his own, the mask that he’d seen Bedelia Du Maurier use. “Let me put the cello in the car first.”

One's got to keep up appearances; after all, I am a devoted husband and father.

Tobias Budge smirked, “Of course.”

Picking up the cello, Will left the shop and took his time carefully securing the instrument in his trunk to avoid it sliding around when he drove. In his coat pocket, his cell started to vibrate softly. He ignored it. Bevelry Katz would call again.

The omega closed the trunk and stood there for a few seconds, bracing himself against the car. He took deep slow breaths, eyes fluttering shut as he recalled why he was doing this, that he was Will Graham-Lecter now, who lived in Baltimore, was thirty-eight and a half years old, mated with an alpha he adored, four children he would die for, and a secret to kill for.

No one would miss Tobias Budge; no parents, no lovers, no children. Plus he was a serial killer.

And not a particularly good one, his shadow remarked tartly.

His heart rate slowed as his resolve came upon him.

“Hello Will.”

Eyes snapping open, he whirled around to face her.

Freddie Lounds studied the shopfront of *Chordophone String Shop* with critical unimpressed eyes. “I would say that I’m surprised to see you here, but we’d both know that’s a lie.”

Will felt his stomach sink even as murderous rage came to a simmering boil within him. “Miss Lounds,” he greeted brusquely, not needing to say more than that really to express his complete disdain of her.

He felt himself recede as the specter took charge, blanketing his rising panic; yes, she hadn’t been factored into the plan, but this could be remedied, he could still make it work even with Freddie Lounds thrown into the mix – *maybe*, his specter chuckled, *we could get her killed too.*

That’s a tall ask, Will mentally sighed, *maybe next time.*

The alpha female shot him a broad smile, “It’s nice to see you too, Will. How was your holidays?”

“Are you *stalking me*?” He ground out.

Lounds gave him a mockingly innocent smile. “I’m just here for a little shopping. You?”

Will snorted, “Taking up the violin?”

Her only response was a smirk. She entered the store.

He stayed where he was, deliberating on when to follow. In his pocket, his phone rang for the third-time on silent and then stopped.

Right now, Bevelry Katz was on the phone to tech support, and demanding that someone triangulate Will Graham’s goddamn cell phone. Then upon getting the address in two-minutes time, she’d curse and call him one more time before giving it up and contacting Baltimore PD, all guns blazing.

Will took a deep bracing inhale of the frigid February air and went back inside. He managed to catch the tail end of Freddie Lounds’ statement as the two wandered from the foyer into the main display parlor:

“…you’re friends with Will Graham.”

He held himself back as his specter held up a finger – *this could be interesting*, *let it play out, you have time*. He checked his watch; yes, there were a few minutes.

"Mister Graham-Lecter? Yes, his son is a one of my clients," Budge explained, the very appearance of reason, as he straightened a violin neck on the rack of spare parts.

"Are you aware that he's with the FBI?" She asked, obviously fishing; Will heard her unspoken question – what was the omega doing here?

"Yes I've heard that he's a teacher at the Academy," the luthier circled back to the foyer.

"He also consults for the BAU."

Are you aware that this man probably pointed them in your direction, she didn't say; the alpha female paused upon noticing his presence. Will felt his mouth stretch in a bitter smile – wow, no wonder his history of service with the BAU was full of crazies seeking him out, if this was the kind of information they were getting.

The beta smiled placidly as he took his place behind the front counter, "That's impressive, but I fail to see what that has to do with me."

Freddie Lounds was undeterred by Will's flinty stare boring into the back of her skull; she changed her mode of attack, "I heard you were taken in for questioning in relation to the Maestro case."

"Yes, that's right," Tobias Budge admitted easily, "But that's to be expected – I do own the only dedicated strings shop in Baltimore."

Right now, Bevelry Katz was demanding that the Baltimore police needed to send an ERT for a possible homicide going down right now, that one of theirs was on the scene and needed back up, the suspect was a beta male, Afro-American, late thirties, presumed armed and extremely dangerous. Will wandered the perimeter of the room, pretending that he was just waiting for his turn.

"You're a licensed luthier aren't you?"

"Yes, the only one in town," the beta answered, still the image of decorum, the friendly shopkeeper. "And I also carry the best catgut in all of Baltimore – I only import from Italy."

"Have the FBI harassed you in any way?" Lounds asked, almost coy as she cocked her head, playing up on her feminine wiles.

Budge shot her a bemused look, "Are you a lawyer?"

"Investigative journalist," she shrugged, "I'm doing this article on FBI blunders – you know how it is, it's really a shame that it's required but the FBI often seems to forget that they're supposed to uphold the law they're serving; entrapment is such a dirty word."

There was a shift in the beta's expression. No one else would have seen it but Will's been studying him long enough to tell that something just changed. Their eyes met over Freddie

Lound's shoulder. Will stared back, neither confirming nor denying, until the beta averted his gaze.

"I'm sorry to say that there's no story here," Budge smiled, "The FBI questioned me, nothing else."

Freddie Lounds thanked him and asked to be shown to the beginner's instruments, intent on showing them how annoying she could be by inserting herself into the scene to eavesdrop. Tobias Budge obliged, still comfortably fitting into his role as the friendly shopkeeper, making sure that she was settled in to browse before coming back to the front counter.

They go through the motions for making the final payment on the cello – he apologized for showing up with a check, the beta waved his apologies away and assured him that for the Lecter's, he would make an exception – aware of their audience in the corner. Lounds pretended to be utterly engrossed in reading and comparing the large cardboard tags tied to each violin. Both of them glanced at her.

Should we kill her? Budge wet his mouth.

Will handed over the check and held the man's gaze; *do something so reckless, and this friendship ends here.* "May I have a receipt?"

"Of course," Budge smiled thinly, displeased. "You'll have to excuse me though, the printer's in the back."

She barely waited for the man to be out of earshot before spinning to pin Will in place with a speculative glint in her eyes.

"You must be proud of him, Tomas, isn't it? He's thirteen right?"

"Twelve," he said shortly, "That's too young, even for you."

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes, "Who do you take me for?"

Will raised his eyebrows, not caring that he was being wildly sarcastic – *read my fucking lips*, his silence hissed. The alpha female smirked, and glanced away to trace a finger through the whorls of a display cello's scroll.

"You never got back to me, Will, I'm still waiting."

She was referring to the card she handed him, asking for a 'fresh perspective' – Will's pretty certain that he'd torn it up that night and thrown it out before they'd even left the shopping village.

"Do you always talk to people who don't want to talk to you?"

"Do you always ignore people who are talking to you?" She retorted, quick as a whip. "You ignore me and yet you talk to corpses; bit of a double-standard, don't you think?"

Despite knowing that its futile, frustration erupted within him and he felt a knee-jerk urge to explain that he wasn't crazy, no matter what lies she liked to publish in that blog of hers; that he was sorting out his thoughts when he spoke; that according to Hannibal, it was a sign of an active mind with powerful analytical abilities. Will forced himself to stay still, to keep his hands flat upon the counter top – on his wrist, the face of his watch glinted in warning.

“I prefer them to you,” he drawled.

Freddie Lound’s mouth stretched into a broad grin, already inserting that ‘quote’ into some incendiary article rehashing all her best insults about the problem that was Will Graham. “Well I’m afraid you’ll just have to put up with my chatter – nervous habit, you see.”

The alpha female came alongside him. “You think he’s the killer don’t you?”

Will slowly turned to face her, “Miss Lounds, I’m going to warn you only once – leave, *now*.”

Freddie Lound’s smile of speculation turned into full-blown glee, believing herself to have gotten her answer.

In the corner of his peripheral vision, the minute hand on his wristwatch shifted one tick.

The police were on their way already, sirens blaring but they would switch that off about three-blocks from here so as to not tip off their suspect. The officers would be uniforms but they’d all be alphas – whenever possible, always send alphas to take down the dangerous perps – and they would all be armed and on high alert. With Budge already tense, all it would take was a single well-placed poke to send these dominoes cascading.

“Isn’t this considered entrapment?”

So she was under the impression that this was an official/unofficial FBI investigation. He could use that. “I’m just another customer,” he replied tightly, right before Tobias Budge re-emerged from the main parlor.

“I’m sorry for the wait – will a handwritten receipt suffice? My printer is playing up.”

Will held the alpha woman’s gaze for one long hard beat before relenting. “Perhaps I can help.”

The beta raised a bemused eyebrow, “I thought you were an academic.”

“My dad was a mechanic,” he revealed, as he followed the shop owner into the inner parlor where he held his lessons and kept his 'workshop.'

There was no printer, just a dozen sharp implements *casually* laid out on the handsome oak work bench, ready to go if Will changed his mind. His eyes studied them before meeting the man’s gaze. The beta handed over the handwritten receipt; Will tucked it neatly into a pocket just as the bell above the door rang sweetly. His heart rate began to rise.

“Excuse me,” the beta said, a touch of ire showing at the continual interruptions to his social calendar.

Will didn’t follow him. He was out of time. His phone buzzed again. He took it out of his pocket and flung it under Tobias Budge’s work desk, ignoring the insistent flashing on the screen.

“Mister Tobias Budge?”

“Yes?” He heard the beta say just as Freddie Lounds asked with false alarm, “Is there a problem, officers?”

Going to the door that the beta had thought he'd oh-so-cleverly hidden in plain sight to look like a utility closet, he slipped inside.

“We’ve received a disturbance report involving this address,” he heard one of the officers say as before he pulled the door in behind him.

“It’s been quiet all day…” was Budge’s muffled response.

He shut the door firmly. Unsurprisingly, this part of the shop/residence was soundproofed.

The cops would request to have a look around, and the beta would let them, hamming it up for the authorities that he's just an affable music store owner, and Freddie Lounds would hopefully for once be useful and distract Budge while this happened. Will rounded the corner in the narrow corridor and came upon the steep wooden steps leading down into the basement.

He didn’t hesitate, pulling on his gloves as he descended into the Maestro’s lair.

There’s another corridor at the bottom of the steps, this time with the dank feel of a mine shaft considering the bare stone walls and rough wooden beams. Well, obviously the renovations didn’t extend here, he thought wryly, as he cautiously rounded the corner – then promptly took his words back. Part of him chuckled darkly; any update of the basement would obviously clash with the serial-killer-chic that Budge had going for him, what with the introductory display shelf of preserved human organs and walls almost dripping with dangerous sharp implements, as well as the ominous drip-drip-drip of the leaky taps.

See, his specter crowed, *bad housekeeping always gets them caught…*

As he'd been hoping, there’s a security screen set up in one of the corners. It appeared to be new, though Will had to wonder how the beta got it set up when any tech person who came down here would have been too distracted by the jars of human interstines to get around to installing it. There’s only two camera angles – the work-space in the second display room which stood guard over the door leading down into the basement, and the front door. On the screen, Freddie Lounds loitered even as the cop standing guard by the front counter gestured for her to leave.

There’s no sound but Will didn’t need it.

He could see the moment that the cop off-screen saw his planted phone because the officer arguing with Lounds came to attention, completely ignoring the redhead now as he placed a ready-hand on his gun. The man disappeared out of sight, with Tobias Budge at his heels.

It's a fatal mistake.

Even through the floorboards he heard the surprised cut-off scream and the hard thud. Someone shouted FREEZE, before there were the thumps of a vicious struggle. Will stayed still, eyes and ears fixed on the ceiling above him. A spray of loose dust or dirty drifted down over him, making him blink and cough a little.

He spun back to the security feed just in time to catch Freddie Lounds bolting, cell clutched in one hand. She was calling 911 by now – good, with her as a witness, everyone would soon know that Budge was a vicious serial killer and hopefully by the end of the week, she would also have convinced her readers that the man's death was a God-send. The story he'll sell won't be hard to match up with whatever she could possibly say – she might like to scrap the bottom of the barrel, but so far, she seemed to be above perjury.

He'll say that he was lured into the back, thinking nothing of helping the man with his malfunctioning printer, that he was choked into unconsciousness and woke to found himself in the basement. The cops would either be dead or too injured to say otherwise, and – Will picked up a heavy metal stand, usually used for holding up a tuba – Tobias Budge wouldn't be able to refute his accusations.

Yes, I killed him, he'll gasp in the ambulance; *it was self-defense, he came at me, I reacted*, he'll admit while holding his head, covered in scrapes and bruises, maybe a broken bone to show how he'd escaped being the Maestro's next victim by the skin of his teeth. He'll shy away from any attempts to touch him while whimpering that he needed Hannibal; and the ERT personnel, almost always exclusively made up of alphas, would fall over themselves trying to assure him that he was safe now and his alpha was on the way.

There was a slam of a door upstairs. Will immediately took refuge behind a stack of crates and boxes, not yet processed for recycling. He saw Budge a split-second before all the lights except for the security display were killed, shrouding the already dank basement in a heavy darkness. He held his breath as the uniform barreled in and took refuge against the shelf of pickled organs, probably not realizing what he was leaning up against as his eyes adjusted to the dimness.

The smell of a young alpha, brimming with contained-violence, that tang of ion that came right before a storm, wafted through the still cool air. He spied the moment that the officer caught his scent – the young officer froze, tilted his head for a better sniff and spun in a wide circle, trying to pinpoint the 'hostage.'

It didn't take much to put him down.

Keeping a firm grip on the metal stand, Will waited until the officer passed his hiding spot, then knocked him out with a vicious swing. The young alpha hit the ground with a sickening smack. Will checked the man's pulse. Still strong, as expected; alphas could withstand a knock or two. He reached for the man's gun.

Suddenly, there was a snarl and Will found himself crashing into a bench. Only his hands springing out on reflex stop him from hitting the table edge at full speed. Pain shattered across his face as he sank down onto the bare cement; what should have been a fatal blow still left him dazed as his entire body fluctuated between fleeing and fighting.

It's all the opportunity that the Maestro needed to unfurl something that made a low sinister whoop through the air. Gasping and still in shock, Will barely managed to throw up his hand still clutching the tuba stand and catch the wickedly sharp piano wires which whipped through the dark at him.

So he has some teeth after all, was his wry thought.

Raising a leg, he slammed his boot into the Maestro's knee at the same time as he flung the stand to the side, predicting that the tangled wires would mean the beta's arm would be pulled by the momentum, sending him off balance. It worked. With a grunt, the beta fell back.

Still panting from the pain, Will struggled onto his feet.

For a silent beat, they held each other's gaze in the semi-dark.

"Did you orchestrate this?" The Maestro finally asked, voice low with brimming fury.

Will smiled facetiously, "Are you disappointed?"

Tobias Budge gave him a look of pure malice, "No, I should have expected nothing else from you."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah sorry this part is a cliffhanger lol

I wrote this part under duress - not from writer's block, no, I seem to hold that at bay pretty well... so far I've updated every 4-8 days, but that may slow now as I've been in crippling pain for the past few days, adding onto an already terrible two weeks. It's cleared up a little today - but I know from experience that it's just as likely to stick around for a month just to screw with me. Please, if you can, send me positive vibes/prayers/wishes that I'll recover, at least enough to eat properly/not shake so much and sit upright without agony.
Thank you to everyone who have commented on the fic or left kudos; I used it as therapy this week reading over them while laid out in bed.

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Chapter Summary

> The past, the present, an interrupted fight, a happy reunion, a moment of fatherly love, a trip, a not-so-happy reunion and finally, a phone call.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter title - use a poison to overcome a poison.
>
> This is the longest chapter I've ever written. I couldn't find where to cut it off naturally at the usual place I stopped at, so I just didn't. No beta, but my gratitude to Septima and Eclectic, who checked in on me to make sure I hadn't died and talked me through the fight scene, talked plot and mood, and Rav3nsta9 who discussed meta with me. You guys were awesome to keep me company (virtually) while I hammered this out. Words are not enough to express my immense gratitude.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 13 December 2002

“For the first time in my life in a long while, I see the possibility of…friendship, and perhaps, intimacy.”

Bedelia Du Maurier sat down in her armchair and paused. “Is there someone new in your life?”

On the couch, her after-hours appointment closed his eyes as he scented his deep blood-black glass of Shiraz and took a delicate sip. “I met someone.”

“An omega?” She smiled, intrigued.

They had spoken of loneliness last time, and of social obligation, biological imperative, and his long dead family. Hannibal hadn’t missed the implied warning behind her probing questions – that he was a male alpha who had just turned thirty-three without a family nor seemingly any intentions to mate. Difficult childhoods were always seen as the first blow to the balance of an alpha psyche – and Hannibal already had that strike against him. It was beginning to be suspicious that he remained unattached, when his instincts should be pushing him to secure a mate and leave a legacy. Modern society had progressed far in its reinvention of how dynamics were defined, but an unattached male alpha was and still remained a

dangerous signifier; Hannibal was not unaware of this – he had a plan of course, he always did.

He met the alpha female's cool gaze and allowed himself a slow pleased smile.

"A prospective mate?" She tipped her head, hiding her astonishment behind dry bemusement, "Is this the reason why you missed your last *six* appointments?"

"I've been visiting New Orleans."

"For business? How did the courtship request go – your client, Mister Martinez, wasn't it?"

"Yes. It's progressing well," Hannibal took a sip of his wine. He took his time, drawing out the silence.

Du Maurier narrowed her eyes at her patient's play at being coy. "For Mister Martinez or for yourself?"

"I imagine for the both of us," he smiled.

The alpha female studied him before smiling back, polite.

"This is unexpected news, Hannibal, but I'm pleased for you. Should I ask who the object of your affection is? Not Mister Martinez's intended I hope."

"No," he chuckled, but didn't answer the question.

She nursed her wine and waited, knowing enough of the other alpha to understand that the best way to get Hannibal to talk was to wait him out. Despite his appearance of calm, he was almost vibrating with energy – she'd call it giddy, if she thought the man had it in him to be giddy.

"I've mentioned him before."

Bedelia Du Maurier tipped her head, as she glanced at her notes from the last appointment – her eyes caught upon a name. "Will, the young police officer you met in New Orleans."

Hannibal's smile widened, and he took a telling breath, caught in some fond remembrance. She smiled despite her internal frown, "You never mentioned he was an omega."

His smile shifted almost imperceptibly to mocking before swinging back to coy, "Our discussion took a tangent, I believe, something about walls."

She allowed herself to arch one eyebrow before checking her wristwatch, "If you don't wish to tell me, Hannibal, that's fine – this is your hour, and we will talk about whatever you wish to talk about, but I am your therapist, and courtship is a big step for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

Bedelia Du Maurier raised her icy gaze, and smiled thinly. “You don’t even date, Hannibal – it’s natural for me to be surprised.”

“I date.”

“You have affairs,” she corrected, voice dry as the Sahara, “It’s not the same.”

Hannibal Lecter took a sip of his wine and after a thoughtful pause, quirked a satisfied little smile, “This isn’t the same, no.”

She held back a sigh. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since my first trip to Louisiana.”

Bedelia Du Maurier did the calculations in her head.

“That was three months ago, Hannibal. It’s taken you this long to bring it up – that’s unlike you.”

“My advances were initially not welcomed,” he advised her, almost wistful as his eyes went to the windows, “And for awhile, it seemed that I would be rejected without even being given a chance to prove myself as Will insisted that we were merely dating.”

He was too satisfied with himself to have been rejected though.

“But that’s changed recently.”

The man nodded, and gave her the closest thing she had ever seen to something akin to joy coming from him. “Yes, he has agreed to be formally courted – though I believe he still considers it dating, at least he still refers to it as such, except now we’re to bring each other to social functions and introduce each other to family and friends.”

Hannibal shot her a look of fond commiseration at his intended’s *beta-ness*, which she took in with fascination.

Dating – friendly social contact between two adults that may or may not lead to casual sex, or a deeper attachment such as a de facto relationship or common law marriage. It’s very beta. Hannibal was nothing if not alpha through and through, despite his seemingly easy-going beta-like personality; she could only presume that Will was beta-born; quite a twist, considering the young alpha’s bloodline and no doubt stringent standards that his ideal mate must meet to be considered *worthy* of carrying on his bloodline.

“This development pleases you.”

“Naturally.”

Naturally. He said it so easily. She hid her frown.

“And he’s aware of your attachment?”

“I very much hope so.”

She eyed him, her curiosity piqued even more. “Tell me about him.”

Hannibal took a drink of his wine and then heaved a breath, his eyes staring off into the distance as he collected his thoughts. “We are nothing alike, and yet I enjoy his company; we are both singular, alone in the world – and due to that, there is an odd…familiarity. Our worlds are different, but he can assume my point of view, understand me.”

She pondered over what he had said – and more importantly, what he hadn’t said; age, appearance, education, or anything really, that someone typically answered with when asked about a paramour.

“Everyone wants to be accepted, Hannibal – but that requires being seen, it requires giving someone your trust,” she said, cautious and watching him closely for his response, “Trust is difficult for you.”

There was a firming of the alpha’s jaw. “I could learn.”

Du Maurier gave an uncertain smile at the dogmatic reply, riveted by this new facet of her patient/colleague. She would never assign anything so asinine as love-at-first-sight to the likes of Hannibal Lecter, and yet it was almost like that; the man was *infatuated*. It made her wonder at what this omega was like; someone beautiful, or at least attractive enough she would guess – Hannibal was an aesthete at heart after all – but good looks alone wouldn’t have won over the likes of Lecter. Intelligent, she decided, as Hannibal had no patience for fools or boors; and Will must also be able to hold a decent conversation to keep the alpha’s interest, so he was probably educated or at least well-read and in possession of a sharp wit. He was beta-raised, or he wouldn’t suggest *dating* to someone like Hannibal Lecter; that was just asking for an invasion of his boundaries.

“I have invited him to spend the winter break with me.”

Without a chaperon?

No, of course not; beta-raised omegas never quite understood why they needed one, did they? Young Will probably didn’t even realize the signals he’d be giving off by accepting the invitation to enter Lecter’s lair, granting the alpha unfettered access to him.

“This relationship seems to be moving very quickly.”

“There’s a certain freedom to dating rather than courtship. I know it’s not entirely appropriate…” Hannibal tilted his wine glass and swirled the remaining liquid around in a slow lazy circle, “but he seems to be looking forwards to the visit – his family was originally from Virginia, and I promised to take him to the vineyards as well as show him my hunting cabin near Middleburg.”

She stared at the man, not certain if she was impressed by the alpha’s brazenness in pursuing his prize or disturbed that he wasn’t going to do a single thing about the impropriety, not

when it suited his agenda so well to have the omega alone and ripe for the plucking. “Would you be taking him to your scheduled social events?”

“Yes,” the alpha savored a small sip. “I’ve already sent back my RSVP for the two of us, for Mrs. Komeda’s New Year’s Eve party, and I have made arrangements with my tailor, for something to be ready for Will when he arrives.”

A clear display of affection from an alpha that even the beta-raised Will would understand.

“Sounds like you have everything worked out.”

Hannibal looked up at her dry tone and shot her chiding smile, enthusiasm undeterred by her apprehension, “I believe so – I’ve made a list of what I think we could enjoy together.”

And no doubt, sexual intercourse was on that list.

How fearsome it must be, she thought, to be the focus of the likes of Hannibal Lecter; youngest ever admitted to medical school in France; finished his training to be a surgeon a year ahead of his peers at Johns Hopkins; it stood to reason that his single-minded focus wouldn’t be set aside during his pursuit of his chosen mate.

The man tipped his head to study her. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m still coming to terms with everything.”

Hannibal smiled coolly.

“You’ve never expressed a desire to mate before.”

The timing *was* suspicious.

The alpha’s mouth quirked, “You’ve helped me understand what I want in a relationship, and more importantly, what I don’t.”

“We were speaking of friendship.”

Because while the young alpha never lacked for company with his wealth and charm and eligible-bachelor status, she doubted he could count his friends on one hand; and even then, the descriptive ‘friend’ was probably a stretch.

“Should I not be friends with my mate?”

She merely stared back at him; already the possessives were being banded about. The man continued on without waiting for her response, “I think we would be good friends – he stimulates me intellectually, and more importantly, we feel an affinity for each other.”

“Because there is a familiarity,” she added on, dubious.

Hannibal Lecter met her skeptical gaze with an almost-roguish wink, “Worry not, Doctor Du Maurier, I have not taken leave of my senses.”

As far as she was concerned, he had.

“While I have never expressed a desire for children, I assure you, I wish to leave my genetic legacy as any other,” and more importantly, Hannibal had found the desired-for genetic co-contributor.

He could see that the alpha female was more than a little unsettled by his sudden conversion to mate-and-breed like a good little alpha; he was rather looking forwards to her reaction when he told her in several weeks time that he planned to spend his rut with Will and ask him for his hand. The sex would be entirely consensual; he’d ensure that he sires, of course, and insist on taking responsibility; the omega would be swayed into accepting his offer, already grown-attached to the embryo and desperately in need of comforts that only an alpha he trusted could provide. They’d hold a small ceremony for the wedding – Will would appreciate the lack of fuss – and a private reception; a honeymoon somewhere close, maybe in the Caribbean; then Will would move to Baltimore, so they could begin nesting in preparation for the baby.

By the age of thirty-four, he intended to be an alpha of good reputation, comfortably settled in as a loving husband and to be eagerly awaiting the arrival of his first child.

“Many alphas in their thirties are often compelled to settle down,” she studied him; “It can be difficult to separate your own desires from the desires that society projects upon you.”

He smirked; so she still considered him a sheep among the masses. “Are you saying that I don’t know my own mind?”

“No, but you may not be thinking it through.”

“I disagree,” Hannibal shifted on the couch, as relaxed as the older psychiatrist had ever seen him – the cat who ate the canary, the image came to her in a sudden moment of alarm and she almost demanded to know what he had done, because while he liked to think no one had caught on, she knew very well the depths he could sink to. “I think for the first time in years, I am thinking clearly.”

Bedelia Du Maurier took a long drink of the wine, almost draining the glass as she stared off to the side. “Family is a lifetime commitment, Hannibal.”

The younger alpha breathed deeply, almost as if he was relishing the idea of it. “Yes, it would be.”

The Present

Budge moved first, picking up a tool with an over-exaggerated claw-end and lunging, his body disappearing in a blur of darkness. Will danced back immediately, aware that the beta had both size and weight to his advantage. While he'd never excelled in hand-to-hand, Will knew enough to put up a serious fight but he had neither inclination nor intention to take Budge down. No, he calculated as he circled the beta, while winning this fight was possible, he needed plausible deniability more; he was the *victim* – biting back wasn't allowed.

Will ducked easily when the weapon was flung at him but stumbled over something in the darkness, cursing as he went down on one knee hard. There's a low warning whoop in the air, and then the sound of spinning, revving up to strike, and desperately, he grabbed the first thing at hand – a pole of wood destined to be the neck of a bass. In the dimness, every breath seemed like a dull roar, every creak was a crack of thunder, and his eyes strained to catch the curve of a silhouette's edge, the glint of thin razor-sharp wires as sweat beaded at his brow.

With his longer reach, he held his found-weapon protectively in front of him, his grip tight enough to fight with but not so tight as to make it a liability if his opponent were to capture it and try to reel him in. Will forced himself to breath slowly and deeply – just a minute longer, he reassured himself, wait for the cavalry, *wait*.

"Everyone will know what you are."

Will smiled mockingly, with his teeth bared. "And what – *you'll* tell them? *You*, a serial killer, a cop-killer?"

Budge paused, uncertain now, but then shrugged it off; "Someone will listen."

He chuckled darkly, suppressing his own anxiety at the idea of the damage Budge could do with his loose lips swiftly and ruthlessly; never show weakness in front of a predator.

With a snarl, Budge lunged for him, that weighed-garrotte of his slashing through the air. Slinging his weapon back in a double-grip as if it were a bat, Will swung it in a wide upward arc, intending to send the damned thing back where it came from. He felt a vicious sense of triumph when Budge fell back with a curse, sent off-balance as he was forced to avoid his own weapon, but didn't let it distract him; darting forward, Will tried to disable the man's hand by striking at his wrist. With equally sharp reflexes, the beta grabbed at the wood – he let go immediately and smirked as he heard Budge stumble, surprised.

Dust and dirt drifted down; the full ERT had arrived and were flooding into the store. Neither of them paid the commotion any attention.

"If you think," Budge growled, "That they won't realize what you are–"

His specter almost yawned.

"Everyone will think that you're trying to accuse your own hostage," he cut the beta off, raising a sharp eyebrow, "perhaps they'll think you're delusional – not willing to face what you are."

His mouth quirked, deliberately incendiary, “It’ll go well with your insanity defence, I’m glad to see you’ve thought about it; they’re gonna *love you* down at Baltimore State.”

The implication that the Maestro would be caught, incarcerated and dissected, tagged, made into a freak-show, infuriated the beta. He was almost shaking in vitriol. Will’s dark specter circled their target, bemused.

“I’m not surrendering,” the man snapped.

He shot the Maestro a smirk. “Good – otherwise I can’t get them to shoot you.”

The beta paused, momentarily caught between his desire to stand his ground and punish Will’s insolence by killing the officers descending upon them, and his equal desire to be practical and flee the scene; because he was smart enough to know being caught with an omega hostage was a *bad* scenario when there were twelve alphas brimming with blood-lust descending upon them.

There was a swell of noise. Officers had found the stairs and were preparing to storm the basement.

It’s all the distraction that Budge needed to swing that flail of his, and without a shield, Will wrenched away, pivoting in a sharp circle that sent him crashing head first into a side counter and matching shelves. Turning immediately, his mind ablaze in panic, Will snatched up a half-finished violin, sacrificing it to the teeth of the garrotte – the attached weight punched through the wood like a hammer.

His hand swung out to protect his face; he bit back a scream of pain as he felt the wires cut through his jacket cuff into his wrist, jerking back to slingshot around his forearm, riding the momentum of the attached weight. A sudden burst of desperate energy sent his knee flying up to slam right into Budge’s abdomen as the beta closed in on him, intent on the kill. The beta wheezed in pain and stumbled away, wrenching a cry from Will as he tugged on his flail to save his weapon from being taken, the wires tearing through cloth and flesh.

There’s a shout and a flash-bang from a smoke grenade.

Will wrenched himself upright, coughing and shaking in pain, almost hunched as he favored his wounded limb. Budge vaulted over the counters and disappeared behind some flimsy folding screens. He cursed and followed, hastily shoving the screens aside, uncaring of the damage – because *dammit*, he’d gotten this far he wasn’t about to let him get away. It’s the wrong decision. A stool came flying at him, sending him toppling against the wall.

Will bit back a gasp as his head and shoulder bounced against brick, everything aching as his head rattled from the impact. He tried to shake it off but there’s a flash of something in the dark. When he wrenched away on instinct, he lost his balance entirely and crashed to the ground, narrowing avoiding the hammer that came flying out at him. It clattered dully on the ground just as there’s an almost-blinding light. Will squinted, eyes stinging before they finally adjusted – the screens had been hiding a hidden corridor to a second exit, probably to the back alley.

Suddenly, the officers were on him, their voices washing over him in a tangle of confusion.

Will slumped against the wall and gestured feebly to the swinging door. “He went that way…”

It’s all the instructions needed to send at least half of the ERT racing out the door and into the back alley. Two officers stayed with him and radioed for paramedics, while the rest secured the scene.

Will breathed heavily, feeling every twinge from his fight and gave only the barest of responses when asked if he was with them, his mind already racing ahead; the plan hadn’t gone exactly, as he had hoped that Tobias Budge would let his ego get the better of him. But the beta had tried to kill an officer or already had, which meant the manhunt was officially on – he could work with this, Will swallowed. Yes, with the FBI resources on his side, he could probably work out where Budge was and get to him first; he’d been telling the beta only the truth – no one would believe him if he suddenly started accusing his own hostage of being a serial killer, especially when Will had already been accused and acquitted.

His eyes fluttered shut as he shook his head at the questions being thrown at him by the paramedics. “I can stand,” he insisted but was ignored. It’s a blur of unfamiliar faces as he’s scooped up into a fireman-carry by a particularly-insistent alpha young enough to be his son, and whisked away to the waiting ambulance.

With the paramedics, Will’s careful to show just enough awareness to be considered aware yet enough disorientation that his memory recall might be faulty; that should give him just enough leeway in any differences between his statement and Lounds’ statement. The beta paramedics fussed over him under the unflinching stare of two alpha officers given guard duties; in the background, the police uniforms were quickly overrun by FBI jackets – there’s a BOLO out, they found Budge’s car so he’s either on foot or had alternate transport, the media rep was already on scene and ready to deal with the news vans that were pulling up now.

To his relief, the female paramedic adjusted the ambulance doors, so no one would be able to get a clear line of sight to him.

He’s certain that besides the obvious damage, there’s possibly a fracture in his hand maybe, light bruising to the ribs. There’s a tang in his mouth from scraping the inside of his cheeks, and he was going to bruise beautifully on his shoulder where the wheels of the stool got him, not to mention the thump with the wall. The paramedic draped a shock blanket over him while her colleague dabbed at his forearm and gave him three-stitches.

Will didn’t need to see a badge to know that the dark-skinned woman in a suit approaching was an FBI agent. She’s accompanied by two men in business dress, but she’s the only who walked like she lived in a suit.

“I don’t think he’s talking,” one of the cops said to her, just as her two companions approached him warily from the side.

“Hey Graham, how you doing?” One of them asked with forced cheer.

He was in his mid-to-late thirties, with a full face of scruff that he maintained fastidiously despite its roughness, a prominent nose and a full thick head of tightly-wound curls.

“Sorry…” Will muttered, pinching his brow, “do I know you?”

“You probably won’t remember us,” the elder of the two broke in, giving the younger man a disapproving side-eye, “But we were on Beverly’s team a few years ago, so we saw quite a bit of you.”

“Hi,” he greeted tonelessly, drawing upon his physical ache to feed his appearance of weariness. So they were FBI after all, though in forensics – he’d have to be careful around them, they might not be trained to profile but they were trained to be observant and to make connections.

“Jimmy Price,” the older one said with a friendly smile, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “This here is Brian Zeller.”

The younger man gave an awkward half-wave.

“We got a call from Beverly-”

“We were in court today, thus the penguin suits,” Zeller interrupted, speaking right over the other man, “On that note, we should go, let you get comfortable, I’m sure you need to lie down or something.”

“*Right*,” Price drawled and gave the other beta a narrow-eyed look, “We thought we’d check up on you.”

Will slowly looked from Price to Zeller and then back again. He almost cracked a smile because he just knew that Beverly Katz had ordered them to come here in her stead; another part of him took a deep breath of satisfaction, at the proof that she saw him as a victim here. He managed somehow to pass off his undoubtedly unpleasant smile as gratitude.

You can tell her I’ll live, but no pictures for awhile.

Both men smiled a little then backed away, still awkward – though Zeller was impatient to be removed from the awkwardness, while Price was a little too interested in the ‘evidence’ being brought up out of Budge’s basement.

Will closed his eyes to brace himself as soon as he saw the female agent make a move towards him. There were two ways to play this – which way, well, that depended on her.

“Professor Graham?”

He slowly opened his eyes, wooden, “Yes.”

“I’m Agent Marshall, I’m with the Baltimore branch; SSA Moses sent me,” she was a beta, lived alone with her pet, and had dedicated her life to the agency (no ring, no make-up, minimal skincare, no jewellery, cat hair on her jacket); and she took her sensitivity training seriously – her words were almost textbook; state your name, let the omega know who you

are, let them know they can trust you on a personal basis through a common relationship or point of social contact before you launch into your inquiry, and for God's sake, be polite and use the omega's title or his or her mate might think you're disrespecting them; "Professor Graham, do you think you can talk? Anything you can tell us might help us."

The female paramedic gave the woman a cold look. The dark-skinned agent ignored it and waited for Will's reply, though her stiffness showed that she wasn't entirely comfortable; not her first case but close to it – she was only in her late twenties – and she was determined to make a difference.

He nodded faintly, the shell-shocked omega, but internally, he was pleased.

"Can you tell me what happened? Agent Katz said you were at the shop as a customer, but I'd like to hear it from your perspective."

He took a breath, hissing when there was a flare of pain as the paramedic rotated his left shoulder. "I was here to pick up my son's cello…"

The agent took a seat next to him across the bumper of the ambulance, her face the picture of concerned 'active' listening.

"I was waiting for my receipt, he said his printer wasn't working so I offered to help…" he shook his head before stopping, because it was hurting his pulled shoulder, and rubbed at the real ache still lingering over his forehead, "He put me in a choke hold. I don't know after that… I blacked out and then I was in the basement, and everything was dark."

In his peripheral vision, Freddie Lounds bundled up the shock blanket in derision and threw it carelessly aside at the paramedic charged with her care; the man threw up his rubber-gloved hand in consternation as he watched her chase after the cop who had been taking her statement, before changing directions and zeroing-in on the elder officer who seemed to be in charge. Will hid his frown.

"And the defensive wounds?" Marshall prompted gently.

The senior officer, a bald stout-necked beta with a hard face – military background was Will's guess, army probably, and a family man outside of work with the prominently displayed wedding ring and the laugh lines – held up a hand to stop the redhead's tirade, and left a frustrated Lounds to being managed by the other officers as he purposefully turned in Will's direction. One of Will's paramedics, the woman who'd given him the blanket, sighed in exasperation as she went to join her fellow paramedic in corralling a riled Lounds. The senior officer's subordinate, a Hispanic female beta, followed at his heels, whatever she had to say silenced by his gesture for quiet.

"Professor?"

He let his stare grow unfocused, and then looked down and away to hide the fact he'd been scoping out the scene, "Um, I woke up, the officer was next to me, already knocked out – he went for the gun so I tackled him. I don't know why I did it."

“You’re talking about Tobias Budge.”

“Yes…” He nodded and reached up to adjust the blanket around him, “We started fighting.”

The police officer interrupted, voice gruff, “Do you know where Budge will go next, sir?”

He shook his head. He could feel the literal wave of frustration that rolled off the man – unsurprising, considering the fact that one of the beta’s officers had been dead on the scene. The other officer, the one Will had knocked out, had been carted off already with a concussion.

The elder man rubbed a hand over his brow, other hand on his hip and spun to stalk away so as to vent his frustration at some poor lackey.

Time to put in the screws…

“Officer?”

The beta turned back. His deputy paused mid-breath, whatever she had been about to say coiled on the tip of her tongue.

“He won’t get caught – or rather,” he added when he saw the man bristle at the implication that Will considered the department to be incompetent, “He won’t let himself be. Tobias Budge thinks he can outsmart everyone; he’s been doing this for *years*,” he glanced at Marshall before dropping his gaze with a put-upon wince, covering his eyes again, “He knew as soon as he killed Wilson and Bresling that he’d get caught eventually – but he won’t let himself be taken in, he’d rather be dead-by-cop than be locked up, and he’s going to take as many people as he can with him.”

“Does he have a gun?” The cop demanded.

Marshall gave the man a warning glance.

Will chuckled without mirth, “He doesn’t need one.”

Through the gaps between his fingers, he saw the senior cop share a look with Marshall and his deputy, before he excused him and his subordinate; they left grim-faced and whispering, determined to spread the news that the suspect for the Maestro serial-murder case, one Tobias Budge, was presumed armed and extremely dangerous, recommendation – shoot on sight to disarm, lethal force if necessary.

The officer wanted to know if the suspect was on foot, get a goddamn Facebook photo, wasn’t that what the blasted thing was good for – anyone confirm on the BOLO? Will eyed the increased fervor of activity around him through his eyelashes, grimly satisfied.

“Do you have any idea where he’ll go next?”

He swung his gaze from the chaos he’d just created to Marshall’s terse face. He shook his head and then paused deliberately. “He’s been to my house,” he told her, voice wavering as he rasped, “My children.”

By the way she breathed in sharply, the agent was assuming the worst; that the children were at home or at least on the way home – and that Tobias Budge aka the Maestro was waiting in the wings. In the background, Zeller immediately pulled out his phone and told him that he was going to call his house, give him the number, while Price disappeared to get cops sent over.

It'll be a nice gesture but the house would be empty. Will had let Marie off early for the day to pick up a few items at the store and requested that Irene take Junior with her to pick up Eli for her gymnastics class, while Tomas and Micah were both directly going from school to a friend's house.

"Is there anything else we ought to know?"

"If they send officers to arrest me, I'd kill them. Then I would find Doctor Lecter, and kill him."

Will felt a swell of vertigo.

His mild-manner husband might be inherently dangerous as an alpha, but Budge was an experienced killer. Will stood sharply despite the pain in his right ribs, all the blood drained from his face. Marshall stood with him, alarmed.

"Professor?"

He turned to tell her to send someone to Hannibal's office as soon as possible, but before he could, he felt a small prick against his upper arm. Will clutched at where the needle had jabbed him, horrified betrayal dawning as he realized what it was. "What did you give me?" He demanded but it came out more like a croak as heaviness blanketed him.

Within moments, it was like his strings had been cut and he felt his knees wobble. He stumbled, right into Price and Zeller, muffling a grunt of pain at the shock to his ribs. They quickly righted him and helped him climb inside the ambulance. Marshall began an argument with the paramedic – it wasn't like he was hysterical, was that really necessary!

As he was laid on the gurney and strapped in, he felt his panic and recrimination jerk at his limbs. Thoughts scattered like dust under the effects of whatever drugs had been injected into him and his eyes burned as he tried to get his traitorous mouth and tongue to *move.*

In the blur, he heard the paramedic defend himself against Marshall's accusations – it was standard medical practice to sedate an omega patient at risk of going into shock, did she want a medical emergency on her hands – *no? Don't tell me how to do my job, Agent*; the omega was showing clear signs of hyperventilation and emotional distress, and listen, his alpha could settle him but he's obviously not here, so forgive the man for trying to do his job and keep the omega from collapse until the husband got here.

Husband, Will thought vaguely, desperately, *my husband*. His lips moved to tell them, to warn them.

Through the slit of his eyes, a half-blurred Price looked down at him, face creased with sympathy. Glancing around to check no one was looking, the beta wiped at his ex-colleague's damp eyes with a tissue.

"It's going to be okay," the beta told him, patting him gently on a shoulder. "Just rest now, Graham."

No, no, it wasn't okay at all.

But then Will's eyes fluttered shut, and everything went dark.

Light filtered through his eyelashes as he squinted up.

A blur of navy blue became protective-padding embedded into the ceiling, bisecting his vision and dividing the collection of small round air vents and LED lights. The indistinct grey bars became handles, stainless-steel. Everything was a sterile monotone or an inoffensive shade of navy-blue… Will gasped, his delayed-panic hitting him all at once in a full body jerk. He struggled to rise as Marshall ended the phone call she'd been on to press upon his shoulders – calm down, professor, she's shouting over his demands to be freed, *calm down.*

Will couldn't calm down, how could he calm down – *don't tell me to calm down!*

His chest screamed with pain. Paramedics rushed to undo the restraints. It's okay, she was telling him urgently, it's okay, it's only been twenty minutes, calm down, your children were all fine, being cared for by your babysitter and there were two agents at the house, we're taking you to your husband, *just stay still*, you'll be up in a moment.

At the reference to Hannibal, he shuddered and finally managed to get out. "Budge told me he was going to kill him."

Marshall looked at him in alarm, "Who?"

"Hannibal."

Will didn't know how to interpret her expression, a cross between relief and remorse and something else. He felt his stomach twist in preparatory dread for bad news but then she said all in a rush, "Doctor Lecter is waiting for you in his office."

He made a noise and looked away from her, so relieved that he felt numb, desperate to be alone and be touched all at once. Someone finally removed the icepack that had been weighing his badly-bruised shoulder.

He let the paramedics help him up but shrugged them off to clamber down from the ambulance himself on shaky legs, using the door as a clutch. Marshall didn't offer to help though her furrowed brow said clearly that she wanted to, but she wouldn't want to be patronized herself and so she'll spare him that indignity. Silently, she led him past the patrol cars and officers, flashing her badge at anyone who looked at them.

The waiting room looked the same as it always did. There was no signs of any struggle, no evidence of any mishap.

Through the open door of Hannibal's office, his eyes traced the shattered glass over the wooden floorboards, the lopsided miniature with the antique-frame that the alpha bought in Spain when they'd gone there for their fifth anniversary, the toppled stand and the statuette of the stag flung wide over the shattered glass, the broken rung of the ladder to the mezzanine, the unknown male corpse on the floor lying face-down in a tepid pool of thick dark blood, being tagged and photographed. Holding his breath, he pressed forward, taking one step and then another, and then another still, standing on the same spot he stood only days before.

One of the two armchairs set up for therapy was askew, and the frame of the trashed end table was toppled over among the glass fragments. The details whispered to him but he couldn't focus, couldn't *see*, a harsh buzz filling his ears as he swallowed thickly, because this wasn't just some crime scene, this was his husband's workplace, somewhere that Hannibal took pride in as an expression of himself, a refuge for his intellectual pursuits, someplace that his patients could relax within, all quiet and pristine with the scent of books and wood hanging in the air.

He'd sat on the back of that armchair two days ago, head bowed arms crossed, as Hannibal fixed him a drink, never mind that it was ten in the morning. He'd been led over to the fireplace, settled into a chair that Hannibal had dragged from some corner. They had sat together, Hannibal with his long legs crossed, the tip of his shoe just brushing Will's. It'd started off as uneasy silence but soon became a comfortable peace, and finally, they'd talked about their plans for the summer holidays when Tomas flew over to Switzerland for summer school. It's only for three weeks in July, the alpha had assured him, a chance for Tomas to stretch his wings a little – why, Hannibal had attended boarding school all year around in Paris at his age, only going home to his uncle's for the holidays – and they would only be a train ride away in Italy.

Then Hannibal had led him around the room, telling him the stories behind the acquisitions:

The miniature from Spain bought on the trip celebrating their anniversary, the woodblock print of the woman with the yellow fish that Hannibal had bought in a Kamakura antique store at his aunt's urging, the beautiful hand-bound and illustrated collection of Dante that the alpha's mother had brought with her as a wedding gift from Florence, a reprint of 'On the Fabric of the Human Body' and many more.

"There was an artist that day in the square, where we were having lunch – it was only our third date, and you were very shy, but you relaxed as we watched her work, perhaps because you felt that I had something else to look at instead of you," Hannibal quirked a flirtatious smile, "I approached her afterwards to buy it, to remind me of that day – and indeed, I think it was a worthwhile investment."

Will chuckled and side-stepped the man, "How?" only to be followed by the alpha, who slid a possessive arm around him.

"You always smiled when you saw it," Hannibal confided and with a nudge of his chin against Will's shoulder, breathed deeply, relishing his omega's rich fragrance, "See? Even now you're smiling."

The younger man pursed his lips, somewhere between ire and affection and stepped away to face the bookcase, his face warm.

"What's this?" It was a leather-bound book of what appeared to be historical essays on the Bourbon Kings with associated photos, taken of various paintings depicting the royal clan – it's a grope for something to wedge between them, but it's flimsy at best.

"Ah, I found that in Rome, at one of the small stalls that was set up along the riverside between Castel Sant'Angelo and Piazza dei Tribunali. It was in terrible condition."

He arched a brow, "No story to tell?"

"I didn't particularly like the man who owned the stall, if that's considered a story. He made unwanted advances towards my companion."

"A date?"

Hannibal gave him a bemused little smile, "She was my second-cousin once-removed, through my mother."

The alpha came alongside him.

"This was from my uncle for my sixteenth birthday when he discovered that I wished to be a doctor," the alpha slid out a large cloth-covered tome and flipped through it carefully with great fondness before handing it over to Will.

Instead of a medical book as he'd been expecting, it was a full collection of Leonardo Da Vinci's anatomy sketches, and Will smiled at the man's attempt to find the intersection between his own passion and his nephew's ambition. Despite being independently titled through a great-granduncle of their father's whose last direct descendant had passed with no alpha-issue, Robertas Lecter considered himself first and foremost an artist, a painter. As a second-born alpha, he'd been free in a way his brother the firstborn hadn't, and had remained unmated – quite scandalously, though in France, they were much more accepting of unattached male alphas than some countries – until his mid-forties. According to Hannibal, his uncle did everything with drama, including taking up with an omega almost two decades younger; Aunt Murasaki had been the muse and goddaughter of a fellow artist, before Robertas had absconded with her to become his Countess.

The alpha thought Elizabeta had a bit of Robertas in her vivacious energy – but of course, his uncle would have loved Micah best, the little budding artist in their brood.

“I will always be thankful to him for it – my transcripts were decent but it was my extra curricula activities, specifically my drawings, which won me a scholarship to Johns Hopkins.” Hannibal drifted to his drawing desk, one hand flicking back the pages; Will joined him and was gifted with a warm smile, soft and private. “Years later, after I had worked for a time in Europe, traveling when I could, it was my fond memories of living here as a student that led me back to Baltimore.”

Will raised his eyes and saw first the points of a pair of stiletto-heeled boots, and then the hem of a long dark purple coat. It was the woman from last Friday, Hannibal’s final appointment before their lunch. She met his gaze briefly, her eyes cat-like and a pale luminous green; did he know her? He hadn’t bothered to pay attention last Friday, but a feeling of familiarity struck him as he studied her. One side of her face was just beginning to bruise, as deep a color as the rich lipstick she liked to use on her sensual mouth; a mouth which quirked up in a wry half-smile, before she turned away with a wince as the paramedic applied more pressure to the wound against her scalp.

Taking a deep breath, he shifted at the sensation of being watched and stopped short as he turned to face his watcher.

The alpha’s mouth softened as though he might smile but the joviality disappeared as Hannibal swallowed convulsively, eyes widening as though struck by the image of Will; he couldn’t imagine that he painted a very pretty picture right now, bruised and bloodied, but it didn’t seem to matter to the man. He exhaled, shivering as he took in those eyes which shone with wetness – the sharp relief, the averted agony of loss, and that ever-present *vulnerability*, that unguarded affection. He wanted to laugh and sob in one breath, because he’d been so worried – he’d been *so worried*, and Hannibal was *fine,* and far more worried about Will.

In one corner, the caustic flash of a crime scene camera went off, jarring them both from their moment. Will lowered his gaze, breathing in against the tide of apologies and frantic questions, because if he started he’d end up babbling.

The alpha stood gingerly and without words, they embraced.

His eyes fluttered shut as he felt the familiar press of his alpha’s features against his neck. Will breathed heavily as he leaned into the hard planes of his alpha’s torso, his attempts to hang onto his composure spilling over into his hunger to be closer, to be squeezed tighter, making him grab at the man with clutching fingers, uncaring that he was almost destroying Hannibal’s suit jacket and hurting himself.

“You’re covered in blood,” he whispered, stilling as his good hand came in contact with the stiff substance and the heavy stench of iron finally pierced his relieved-stupor.

“It’s not mine,” Hannibal shushed him, pressing fervent kisses to his brow and temple again and again and again.

He turned his head to hide in the crook of the alpha’s neck, stifling a noise that wanted to escape. Will berated himself for the risk he had taken – and the mistakes he’d made – and most of all, he blamed himself for forgetting to protect Hannibal. Overconfident and stupid, *stupid* – if he lost the man, if he’d lost him…

He sucked in a sharp breath, shocked by the bloom of a hot burning sensation through his breastbone. The alpha's hand covered his own bandaged one, drawing it away from where it desperately clutched Hannibal's hip to bestow upon it a reverent kiss.

"I was worried you were dead," Hannibal murmured into his hair, possessively clinging to his injured hand and an arm thrown like a brace across his back.

Will squeezed his eyes shut and kissed the shoulder his chin was propped on. *I thought you were dead too*, he wanted to tell him, *I'm so sorry I didn't try harder but they sedated me, I would have come, I'm sorry I caused this, I'm sorry, I didn't forget you I swear, the children were safe, I made sure of it, please forgive me*. But none of it made it past his lips. To speak now would be too much. Hannibal seemed to know what he wanted to say despite his total silence, because he shushed him again, enfolding Will firmly in the brace of his arms.

They were silent together for a long minute, taking in each other's scent, the warmth and weight of each other's forms.

"Are you okay?" Hannibal asked gently, pulling back to cup Will's jaw.

Nodding, he further hid his face against the alpha's neck.

Sighing tiredly, Hannibal laid his head atop Will's, mouth pressed reassuringly into his tangled curls. "It's okay, Will, it's over now."

Well, at least this part.

They ended up sitting down in the waiting room, holding hands as paramedics finished bandaging Hannibal's wrist and forearm. At one point their eyes met over the droning instructions of the paramedic; because who would have thought – they had matching garrotte wounds. It's so wrong to joke about and yet, it's as amusing as it was morbid. With a small wry smile, Hannibal reached over, pulling him to rest in the crook of his neck.

Agent Marshall was soon joined by an elderly omega woman with silver-blonde hair, introduced as Doctor Parr of the BAU and a member of Moses' team, and then to Will's surprise, Jack Crawford. The alpha stepped inside quietly, studied the crime scene investigators and photographers scurrying about through the open door to Hannibal's office with a terse expression, before turning to approach them.

Will averted his eyes, hiding a frown.

"Jack," Hannibal greeted in an undertone of surprise.

There was a pause before his fellow alpha answered, almost grudgingly, "Hannibal…Will, I came as soon as I heard. Are you both alright?"

"Yes, we're alright," the alpha's hand tightened, "Thankfully."

Crawford nodded, his eyes flicking to Will.

He further leaned into the alpha's side despite feeling childish, uncomfortable with the scrutiny; from the way that the alpha's breathing picked up and his other hand came up to rest atop Will's, he didn't mind at all and rather preferred that his omega stayed close, his protective-instincts still aroused from the attack. Jack Crawford smiled grudgingly as Will stoically ignored the agent's continual attempts to catch his eye. It's almost a relief when Doctor Parr cleared her throat, prompting Crawford to step back.

"Doctor Lecter," she greeted decorously, "I'm Doctor Helen Parr of the BAU."

"Hello," Hannibal straightened, ever respectful.

"How are you feeling? Do you believe that you'll be able to answer some questions?"

Perhaps it was that she was an omega, but her genteel intonation made her voice seem soft and approachable; Will could literally feel the tension triggered by Crawford's presence leave Hannibal's shoulders.

The alpha looked to him, releasing his hand to slide an arm around Will, taking comfort as much as he was offering it. "Please keep it brief; our children are waiting for us at home."

"Yes of course," she nodded, and despite her brisk tone, she did take it as only natural that the children come first, as an omega who was a mother and now was a proud grandmother (the plain hair ties looped unassumingly around her slender wrist, something for tying back hair on little heads, right next to her gold watch – an anniversary gift from years ago, much-loved).

Will kept his eyes focused on the floor as she went through the standard questions; what did Tobias Budge say when he arrived; did he give any hints to his goals, where he would go next; repeat with as much accuracy as you can exactly what he said.

Hannibal wanted to help, but could only tell her so much; he was just wrapping up the session when the man had arrived, startling both him and his patient; Budge greeted him and when the alpha had attempted to ask him what he was doing here, angry at having his patient's privacy invaded, the man had informed him unambiguously of his intentions to kill him. Hannibal had been shocked but quickly caught on when Budge referred to Will's visit to the cello shop – and immediately assumed the worst.

Hannibal paused to press his nose to Will's hair, steadying himself before resuming his recount; he'd tried to dismiss his patient to safety, but the man had not given him a chance before attacking. Budge would have killed him, the alpha admitted with sorrow, if not for John's timely intervention.

Will followed the alpha's gaze at the wall of the waiting room, to the approximate location of the unknown body that was lying prostrate upon the office floor, a pool of black blood spreading out from where he'd had his neck sliced open with a scalpel. Apparently he was John Warszawski, a personal bodyguard who was also an ex-cop.

Budge had been surprised by the unexpected hurdle of having a trained body guard attack him – he had fought back and killed him, yes, but the diversion had meant that finally, the

psychiatrist managed to fight back and turn the tide; yes, the blood on the broken rung of the ladder was Budge's blood; and when the beta chose to flee, Hannibal hadn't pursued him, instead attempting to save the bodyguard; unfortunately, it had been too late.

In the background, Jack Crawford skulked the perimeter of the waiting room, listening with a deep frown, pausing occasionally to watch the crime scene investigators at their work.

"It happened so quickly," the alpha was almost apologetic, taking a breath to calm himself as his protective instincts flared anew post-recount, his hand growing heavy over Will's neck. "It's a terrible ordeal for someone to go through, and I can only hope that my patient won't be traumatized by the experience – and deeply relieved that she wasn't grievously harmed."

"Your patient," Marshall frowned, glancing through the doorway at the young woman in question, "Miss Margot Verger?"

Will noted her intonation with curiosity – was the woman famous or something?

Doctor Parr shifted slightly to glance back at the young woman in question, Miss Margot Verger, who had regained some color to her cheeks and was busily texting on her phone now, ignoring the fussing of the paramedic dabbing at the blood still trickling down the side of her face with the kind of nonchalance only the very rich could possess. Will studied her – her high-collared black-lace shirt, her hunched posture as though braced against a blow, her drawn features – and blinked when she suddenly looked up, pale eyes boring into him.

Will flicked his gaze to her stiletto-heeled boots.

"Could she have been the target?"

Jack Crawford slid his hands into his pocket and came to a stand-still, watching the tableau with the intensity of a zoologist studying a particular interesting, rare and dangerous specimen.

Hannibal paused, licking his lips, "I don't know. Perhaps. If she was the target, you'll have to speak to her – I am only privy to what she shares with me, and even then I am bound by doctor-patient confidentiality. But I can tell you this; Budge never addressed her."

Agent Marshall frowned, looking as she was going to insist that surely, there was more, that there was something that Hannibal wasn't telling them, even if it's only because he didn't realize the importance of the information; but a glance to her more experienced colleague silenced her.

"I understand that you know the suspect well," Doctor Parr said, changing the subject.

The alpha inhaled, his face hardening, "Yes, I suppose we were acquaintances; we ran in adjacent social circles as I'm on the board for the Metropolitan – he was at my house recently, restringing my harpsichord."

"And you've not had any problems, noticed anything out of place in your interactions," the elder omega probed gently, "No hint of any obsessive behaviour…?"

“No,” Hannibal smiled thinly, “in fact, I found him agreeable and rather charming in the four times we’ve met. Believe me, I had no idea that he was capable of this.”

Surreptitiously, he reached out and placed a hand on the alpha’s thigh, squeezing in comfort at the hint of recrimination in Hannibal’s bitter tone. Doctor Parr glanced at him, but he pretended to only have eyes for his alpha.

“Do you know why your husband was there this afternoon?”

Hannibal glanced over to him, eyes softening in fondness, “Yes, our son’s cello was being restored – it was to be picked up this afternoon. I suppose Will must have wanted to surprise him.”

He smiled weakly and was warmed by the way that Hannibal returned it, tired and a little rough at the edges but brimming with that affection he welded so dangerously. The alpha shifted closer, despite the armrests which divided them.

“Did he say anything else, anything at all, about why he came after you?”

Hannibal turned to the beta, and opened his mouth to speak before pausing, his eyes flicking off to the side as his lips thinned to a razor-sharp line. “No, only that he was going away and he intended to leave a gift.”

A gift for who? was the question on both women’s faces. Framed between their bodies, Jack Crawford stared at Will, almost broadcasting his frustration. Already he could see from Parr’s furrowed brow that she thought there was something wrong with the picture; why Doctor Lecter, she was thinking – because he was the mate of Will Graham who had identified him as the Maestro? But why take *the risk* to come here, just to attack the mate of an off-duty Special Agent? That smacked of revenge, which was personal – and Will Graham didn’t even know Budge outside of their limited interactions as business owner and customer; yes, further investigations were in order.

Well, one couldn’t have that, his shadow drawled.

No, he couldn’t – no matter what became of Budge, this afternoon needed to be an open-and-shut case.

A diversion was needed, he decided, furiously studying every detail of Parr to find something, anything, a tail to pull upon. She glanced over at him, mouth tipping up at the edges in a sympathetic, almost maternal smile, there and gone in a breath – *ah, there it was.*

“I fought back, I told him he was going to be arrested so he should just surrender,” he said, voice timid and quavering, then with a self-deprecating little smile down at his lap, “He *really* didn’t like that,” before turning his gaze back to Hannibal, who raising their joined hands, pressed a tender kiss to the bandaged palm.

He dug into his own remorse and fears over the idea of losing the alpha whom he had grown to care for – who saw him, all his foibles and idiosyncrasies, and wanted it all – he pressed his lips together as the expected pain hit because this was necessary; he *needed* his emotions

here, he needed something real to show Doctor Parr; she wasn't trained in forensic psychology but she was an omega, and a linguist who specialized in non-verbal communication. Will took a shaky breath, letting the room see how much he'd been frightened by the prospect of losing the alpha, "He said he was going to kill the officers coming to arrest him, and then he'd kill…"

He didn't finish, swallowing and reining everything in as it threatened to override his control. His ribs squeezed like he was being suffocated. "He was trying to hurt me while leaving a gift for whoever he was serenading," he glanced at the agents before breaking off the gaze to stare at the floorboards, "Because they never got to finish."

Hannibal ran his hand down the length of his spine and then back up again to anchor at the nape of his neck, his expression indescribably soft, mouth slack and eyes bright with something sharp and sweet. Will glanced at him, more exhausted from that moment than all the ones leading up to it, and leaned into the touch; the man drew him close, kissing him firmly on the forehead as he was pressed into the alpha's throat, an arm wrapping around his head to give him a moment of calm, of privacy.

Eyes squeezed shut, sounds muffled by cloth and flesh, Will breathed.

Doctor Parr was respectfully silent, giving them the moment, with the younger agent following her lead.

"This borders on a breach of confidentiality," the alpha said quietly, neck shifting under his cheek to turn in Doctor Parr's direction, "Under the circumstances though, you should know that I have a patient whom I've seen in Tobias Budge's company – they often attended the opera together. I didn't even think of it until now but Budge may seek him out; his life could be in danger."

Or he could be an accessory or an accomplice.

His specter peeked in from where he was leaning behind the office doorway and chuckled at how unwittingly helpful the alpha was.

The agents shared a look. In the background, Crawford's brows drew together.

"If you could provide Agent Marshall with the name and address," Parr began and even before she'd finished saying her fellow agent's name, Hannibal was nodding, certainly, and with a reassuring caress of Will's neck, stood to retrieve the relevant file.

Doctor Parr gave him a small comforting smile in his alpha's absence and nodded at him as she turned to leave, a decorous parting that didn't require any effort on Will's part except to nod back.

They left via FBI escort, with Marshall promising to have someone drive the Bentley over to the house for them later tonight. When they arrived, Will headed for the house, leaving Hannibal with the logistics of negotiating when they'd be available to make their statements official, their security detail over the weekend, so on and so forth. He barely paid notice to the two agents inside who attempted to greet him and introduce themselves, nodding jerkily as he flew past to the staircase and bolted up to where he could hear the sound of Irene's voice, light and sweet, telling a story.

He didn't get further than the first landing before the children caught the sound of him coming up and were crowding the top of the stairs. Will still hadn't looked at himself in a mirror yet, but it must have been terrible; Tomas' eyes popped open in shock; Elizabeta's excitement at his return became a horrified gasp; Micah took one look and broken into loud hiccupping sobs, rushing forwards to hurl himself down the stairs at Daddy – because what was wrong, Daddy had *bandages*, Daddy had a *bruise* on his face, Daddy was *bleeding*!

He caught the boy up into his arms, chuckling in between little hitched breaths that might have been sobs too as Micah clung to him like a limpet, his face almost tomato-red as he cried, dribbling tears and snot shamelessly all over Daddy's jacket.

"It's okay," Will shushed as he rocked him, not caring that his body ached with exhaustion, that his shoulder throbbed from the weight of Micah's little head, that even reaching out to stroke Eli's hair (her mouth was a stiff unhappy line, her eyes shimmering dangerously) pulled on the wounds under his mangled wrist and forearm, "I'm fine, see? The doctors fixed me."

"Where's papa, daddy?" Tomas asked softly, voice thin and quivering. Eli look up desperately as her little mouth scrunched up, on the verge of tears herself.

"Downstairs with the police," Will told them gently, holding out his free arm for a cuddle. He's promptly inundated as both children rushed him; the little girl elbowed her brother for right of access to Daddy, before her aggression calmed as the scent of her omega father eased her distress.

Satisfied that her Daddy was accounted for, she savored the closeness then pulled away to track down her missing Papa, running haphazardly down the stairs, all of Hannibal's carefully drilled manners forgotten in her worry. Her older brother remained burrowed into Daddy's side, hiding his face in what little space was left between Will's torso and his little brother's curled form. Will wrapped his arm around his firstborn's head, and leaned down to kiss Tomas' hair. Another minute passed before the twelve-year old finally stepped back to follow Eli and find Papa.

He raised his gaze to Irene. The beta girl smiled warmly despite struggling to hold onto Junior who reached for Will with discontent cries, twisting and kicking.

"Cuddle, daddy," the little boy cried, almost red with indignation at being denied, "Daddy, I wanna cuddle!"

Will smiled despite the flicker of pain it caused in his jaw and scalp, and whispered that Daddy needed to look after the baby, Micah, are you okay now, sweetie? The four year-old

nodded, reluctant to leave his Daddy but also protective of his younger sibling.

The toddler instantly calmed within the circle of Will's arms, laying his head docilely in the crook of his Daddy's neck as he sucked on his thumb, content as he scented his father. Will's eyes fluttered shut as he scented the child back. In the background, Micah whispered that he was hungry, could he have a snack please, Irene? Will's mouth tugged at the edges in an exhausted smile as he heard the college student whisper back that yes, of course they could, let's go see what your father prepared for snacks today.

He stayed in the silence of the upstairs corridor for a few minutes, rubbing circles over Junior's back, basking in the clear familiar scent of his children, the dogs, *home*, that permeated every inch of the space before descending the stairs to join the others.

Downstairs, Hannibal was already changed into his house sweater and in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on a simple pasta for dinner – his version of simple (homemade fresh *pappardelle* he'd prepared and set aside last night in the fridge; no appetizer or soup but definitely dessert) – with Tomas dutifully chopping herbs at the vegetables station, and Eli circling Papa whenever she wasn't mentoring Micah, who was delighted that he could help set the table though at the moment, he was only tall enough to hold the utensils basket for his older siblings. It's a bit early for dinner, but none of the children seemed to have noticed, reassured by the familiarity of the bustle.

By mutual silent agreement, the crazy afternoon was set aside, with Hannibal effortlessly resuming the rhythm of daily life – because even if all the alpha wanted was to bundle Will upstairs into bed and hold him there until the omega stopped trembling, their children needed them tonight to set their world right.

It was any other Friday night except for how Tomas glanced at Dad out of the corner of his eyes as he finished chopping the sweet basil, clearly anxious over Will's silence; and Eli was a little quieter when they finally sat to eat, clearly wanting to ask about what had happened, why were there police officers at their house again, was Daddy in trouble, what happened to Papa's arm, who hit Daddy in the face – *she's going to kick/bite/punch them for hurting her Daddy* – and a million other things. They're bursting between the seams of her pursed little mouth as she chewed and informed them that Riley was going to have swimming lessons this summer, could she go too?

Will smiled at her hopeful stare in his direction and with a glance at Hannibal, nodded permission.

Elizabeta beamed back and leaped up, following Tomas into the kitchen to help with dessert. Micah needed to use the facilities, bolting away so he'd be back as soon as possible.

Hannibal took a sip of his wine and placed his bandaged hand on the table, palm-up. Will unwrapped one arm from around Junior and took the offered comfort.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, somewhat," he replied quietly, mindful that any moment the children might come back.

“You received a shock this afternoon.”

He shrugged; he’s pretty sure that Hannibal got the bigger shock.

“It’s hard to believe,” the alpha said softly, shaking his head, “A man died today in my office.”

Will felt a pang of guilt, letting go of the alpha to reach for his glass of water. “Did you know him well?”

“John? Not well,” Hannibal put down his wine glass and reached for the jug, refilling Will’s glass, “but we were friendly; he’s been working for Margot as long as she has been my patient.”

He thanked the man before taking a drink, noting the use of the woman’s first name. Hannibal sighed heavily, “At some point over the weekend, we’ll have to speak to each of the children.

Will paused between sips, unnerved at the idea of having to explain today to the children at all. But this was the way that Hannibal and he – pre-amnesia him, that was – had agreed to bring up the children, that they would tell the truth and deal with the aftermath. In this case, the alpha felt that while Micah was too young for any detailed explanations other than reassurances that the bad man won’t be coming after them again, that Papa and Daddy were both safe and well, Elizabeta would need something with more substance.

“The hardest one will be Tomas,” the alpha murmured, and then catching the younger man’s terse stare, gave him a commiserating smile, “You know what he’s like, Will, he has your perception; if we don’t tell him the facts and address his questions now, it will only fester.”

He gave a stiff nod, because yes, while his firstborn was undeniably mature beyond his years, he was still just a little boy in the end.

Whatever else Hannibal was going to say was curtained, as Tomas and Elizabeta rejoined them; Tomas carrying a tray of five kidney-shaped ceramic dishes; Elizabeta hugging a bowl of extra strawberries, for anyone who wanted extras and for the baby who wasn’t allowed to eat sorbet yet. Micah happily dug into his little dish of sweet creamy strawberry sorbet, topped with fresh strawberries dusted lightly in vanilla sugar, all his worries forgotten.

Will smiled across the table at the four year-old and then at Hannibal, who reading his mind, reached across to run a fond hand over the little blond head for him. Micah glanced up to beam but quickly returned to enjoying his dessert.

After dinner was finished and cleaned up, washed and dried, Will gave Junior and Micah their bath, but let Hannibal handle Micah for his usual bedtime story while he settled the toddler down for bed with a cuddle and a half-hearted attempt at a lullaby that was more mindless humming than melody; Junior smiled around his dummy and slowly drifted off, not stirring for once as he was transferred from Will’s arms into his crib. Then he’d gone to kiss Micah goodnight and switch on the night light, and finally, went to check on Tomas while

Hannibal went to make sure that Eli hadn't become 'distracted' in the middle of brushing her teeth.

The boy looked up from whatever he was engrossed in as Will cracked open his door.

"Can I come in?" He asked, uncertain.

Tomas nodded, putting his tablet in sleep mode and placing it on his pillow. Stepping inside the well-appointed room, decorated in calming shades of jade and cream, Will fought against his instinct to apologise and leave, saying that he couldn't do this, that he needed time to prepare; he shut the door firmly behind him.

Wiping his hands on his pants, he moved to sit at the study desk but changed directions when his son shifted, making a space for him. Will sat with a silent inhale and closed his eyes as his firstborn leaned into his shoulder. Sliding his arms around the boy to give him a side-hug, he kissed the mop of loose wavy locks, so similar to his own when he had been much younger. A heaviness left him as they stayed like that, Tomas slumped against him in the crescent of his arm, sharing a profound silence. Out of the children, his firstborn understood what had happened, *what could have happened*, and remained rattled by the idea of an alternate, far less happier ending.

Though he had known that this discussion would come after he had enacted his plans, Will had never tried to envision it – setting his plan in motion had been hard enough. If he had thought about the aftermath, if he had allowed it to distract him…

"No one told me anything when Irene came straight back to get me from Jake's house," Tomas told him, voice soft but crisp, almost business-like, "I listened to them talking, the officers at the house – they said Mister Budge tried to kill you, dad."

Will pursed his lips at the vulnerable hazel eyes turned up in his direction, bidding for the truth from him. Despite his even tone, Tomas was as upset as Micah had been this afternoon if not more distressed. Grudgingly, he gave a guilty nod.

Tomas' mouth trembled before he regained control of it to ask, "Did he really try to kill papa too?"

He paused, briefly entertaining the idea of denying it before realizing that he couldn't – that his son would figure out the truth anyway, and only resent him for it. No matter how ugly the truth was, like him, Tomas wanted to know, that he feared walking into rehearsals next week with everyone staring at him while he stood there like an idiot not knowing why, a situation he found far more unnerving than the ugliness of knowing.

"Yes," he whispered.

The boy's mouth pursed as he looked downwards to his lap, brows furrowed.

"It's not your fault," Will said in a rush, easily catching onto what his son was turning over in his head – that it was *his* fault, that Budge wouldn't have come after his father if he hadn't sent Will into this man's path.

He squeezed the boy's shoulder, "Three years ago, while I was still working, I investigated one of Mister Budge's murders – when I went to pick up the cello today, I realized Mister Budge's secret; that's what this was about, Tomas, it had *nothing* to do you, do you understand? He came after me, because I had figured out the truth – it had *absolutely nothing* to do with you."

Taking a halting breath, the omega boy nodded, looking away to the floor. Will curled himself over the boy, chin propped on his bowed head.

"Mister Budge had been leading a double life for a long time – before he met me, before he met you," Will murmured, "Today was just bad timing and bad luck."

The boy glanced at him, "Bad luck seems to follow you around."

For a moment, he didn't know what to say, startled by the remark, the sarcasm behind it. But then Tomas gave him an uncertain smile, good-humored, an invitation to a moment of levity. Will gave a tiny exhausted laugh, because *of course* his child would inherit his sense of humor – Tomas had no chance really, between him and Hannibal.

"Are you still going to work for the FBI?" Tomas asked, looking genuinely curious – and quietly, desperately concerned.

Will pressed his lips together, still trying to figure out how much he should say. "Yes. I'm only on leave until spring break finishes, you know that."

The boy lowered his head with a frown, "But I thought – with this, you getting injured, I just thought maybe you'd changed your mind…"

"About returning to work?" He asked, surprised.

Looking almost guilty, Tomas glanced up at him before nodding.

Will licked his lips, uncertain of his response. It's not as if he couldn't understand Tomas' desire for him to quit; the nightmares were enough of a reason, never mind everything else. But he knew what he had to do – and staying close to the BAU was the best way to ensure that no one would ever find out his secret; not Beverly or Rob Papparella, not the FBI, and definitely not Hannibal.

"Tomas," He said carefully, "This is my job."

The boy shrugged, staring down at his socked feet, "You told me you were a teacher."

Will sighed, "And I *am* a teacher, well…generally-speaking."

By the side-eye he got, Tomas thought that the loopholes attached to Dad's 'generally-speaking' were long enough to make a daisy-chain around Saturn.

"My job is to help train FBI agents, Tomas; I teach future agents how to recognize people who might be dangerous criminals or murderers, I teach them how these people think and how to catch them."

“I know, dad,” the twelve-year old exhaled, resigned; but his eyes were sad – *why you,* they demanded to know, *why you?*

Will sensed that he’d just made a conversational misstep.

“Evan’s mother doesn’t work,” the boy told him quietly, snuggling in further against Will’s side. “Neither does Jake’s dad.”

It took a second for him to fathom the meaning behind the non sequitur.

He knew that it was acceptable, even the ‘done’ thing, for an omega to put a pause on their career, switch careers to something more suitable for weathering the demands and rigors of parenthood, or even quit entirely to devote themselves to rearing children. He imagined that it must have come up at some point in the first few years of marriage – and obviously, Hannibal hadn’t pushed the issue, just as he wasn’t pushing the issue now despite his clear desire to have Will at home – and wasn’t at all surprised that Tomas considered it plausible even *desired* that his omega father stayed home, having been raised in this environment. But that wasn’t how Will was brought up.

Among betas, everyone worked. Most did it to put food on the table, and some, who no longer had to worry about those things, would work in support of a greater cause, or perhaps pursue a passion. Sure, you took breaks, you took time off for injuries/illnesses or even took an extended leave of absence from employment to rear children, but you always returned to work. The idea of just allowing himself to be taken care of materially by his alpha, stood out to him as…foreign.

“Don’t worry,” his son murmured into the silence that had fallen, “I know it’s your job…”

And Tomas wasn’t asking him to quit, no, but how he wanted it.

The thoughtful twelve-year old was at the age now where he was starting to realize consciously that he was different from almost ninety-percent of his peers, who were betas and alphas; he was also beginning to understand that his omega father was different from the other omega-parents in his social sphere – he accepted it, for it was an important part of who his Dad was, but sometimes he just wanted his father to be like all the other omega-parents; to stay home where it was safe, away from the murderers, and let Papa take care of him.

Will swallowed, but didn’t say anything.

“Is Mister Budge dead?”

He shook his head.

The twelve-year old frowned, eyes flicking back to the floor.

“Are you going to kill him?”

Yes. Somehow, someway, I’ll make sure that he’s dead and stays that way.

“I’m not working the case, Tomas – whatever happens to Mister Budge, it’s up to the FBI now.”

Tomas nodded slowly, brows furrowed.

“Are they going to kill him?”

Will hoped so. Externally, he pressed a kiss to the top of his little boy’s head. “No, Tomas, they’re going to catch him, put him a mental hospital so he can be treated and kept from hurting anyone else.”

“Alexander Trussell said that you were in a mental hospital.”

Alexander Trussell was a spiteful little shit, Will thought, thinking back to the unpleasant fifteen-year old that he’d met at one of his son’s rehearsals. An above-decent player at best, the beta teen didn’t like being upstaged by someone several years below him – he was one of the oldest musicians in the strings section, and had expected his seniority to get him the first chair once the previous cello first chair, and Tomas’ mentor, Emily Lin, graduated.

He kept insinuating that Tomas had gotten the position because of his good looks – that all the alpha patrons and sponsors would be too busy looking at his pretty face to care about how they sounded. The comments veered dangerously into derogatory slurs of ‘omegas get by on their backs,’ and they were disturbing since Tomas was only twelve. Parental and teacher intervention had only done so much to curb the young man. Will swore, if that little jerk ever thought to place a single finger on Tomas…

He must have said his first thought aloud, because Tomas broke out in a shocked laugh.

“*Dad*,” the boy groaned, the edge of his mouth tugging up helplessly even as his face kept trying to wretch itself back into being serious.

This wasn’t something he could joke about and ignore though. Alexander Trussell might have flung the comment about the mental hospital to wound, to imply that there was something wrong with Tomas because there was something wrong with his father, but there would be others after him.

Sooner or later, Tomas’ peers, some of whom would be his son’s friends would hear things from their parents or neighbors, or read about it on the internet since they were at the age where they could understand these things; they’d be curious and have questions, and Tomas needed to be able to answer them, to be confident in the face of that onslaught. Hannibal had explained the events three years ago when they’d happened, and so the boy knew all the facts; but Tomas had never heard about it from him.

“Yes, I was in a mental hospital,” he admitted quietly, stroking a tender hand over his child’s hair, using it to ground himself. “I was sick – I had a brain infection that needed treatment, which I got at the hospital.”

The boy stared at his lap, “I don’t think that’s what Alexander Trussell meant.”

Somebody seriously needed to shoot Freddie Lounds.

“They thought you were crazy, didn’t they?” Tomas asked timidly, “Like the way that Mister Budge is crazy.”

Will held his breath as he searched the boy’s eyes for fear, revulsion, confusion. Tomas stared back at him, as bold as ever, secure in his belief that he could trust Dad, and overflowing with sympathy for the complicated man that his omega-parent was.

“The FBI made a mistake,” He held the boy’s gaze, giving back the trust he had received; “They thought that I’d killed someone – so they took me to the mental hospital where I’d be kept from hurting anyone else. Later, they discovered that they were wrong, that the real murderer had taken advantage of me being sick to make me look guilty. I was treated, and I got better – so they let me go.”

“Does that mean if they catch Mister Budge, they’re going to let him out after he’s cured?”

Will had nothing to say to that, but it seemed the question was rhetorical. Tomas looked up, cheek pressed against a shoulder, brows twisted together, “Dad,” he paused, “Mister Budge was nice to me – was he…pretending?”

Will stared down his child – his wavy curls, his little bowed mouth, those eyes, *his eyes* – and felt an overwhelming sense of protectiveness. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to the boy’s hairline.

“He wasn’t going to hurt you,” he murmured, addressing the unspoken question – because even if he couldn’t have guaranteed that Tomas would have been safe, Budge hadn’t been lying when he’d praised Tomas’ musical abilities; and his selection criteria stuck to those whose sense of musicality, or rather a lack of it, offended him.

Thankfully his firstborn accepted his words as truth, and settled against him once more.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Can we go fishing this weekend?”

Will chuckled and tightened his arm around the boy, “Help me convince your papa to come too?” Because he would literally pay to see Hannibal attempting to wear his designer clothes while stumbling around in waders.

Tomas gave him a mischievous little smile, and nodded.

“Do you want to tell him we’re going fishing or should I?”

The twelve-year old grinned and promptly jumped up, his socked feet almost silent as he ran out of his bedroom to look for Papa and tell him that they were going fishing this weekend, whether he liked it or not.

Bedelia Du Maurier poured the wine, carefully and slowly, mindful to not spill any. Despite her best efforts, a single drop hit the silver platter the wine glasses rested upon, a deep blood red. Straightening, she offered the wine to her unexpected guest – or was that patient? Ex-patient? Taking her own glass, she took a sip, refilled it to the brim, before taking the armchair opposite.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Hannibal. I don’t remember sharing my new address with you.”

Hannibal Lecter savored the aroma of the red wine he’d brought for the occasion, flown all the way across the Pacific – *Kellermeister ‘Wild Witch' Shiraz*, the label declared – and ignored her implied question. Her eyes caught on the bandage peeking out from under the cuff of his shirt sleeve. “I thought it was time for us to catch up, now that you’ve taken on Will as your patient.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I am not here to probe for details of my mate’s visits; his conversations with you are private, and should remain that way.”

“Then why are you here?” She asked, smiling thinly; to ‘catch up’ would require them to be friends, which they were not. “Are you here to invite me to dinner?”

The man raised his gaze to meet hers, a subtle curve to his mouth. “Do you intend to point a gun at me?”

Her smile froze along with the rest of her.

The alpha threw her a bemused look before shifting his attention to the dramatic print of a painting depicting a sail ship caught in the maws of a giant rolling wave. It’s didn’t fit her at all, but it had come with the apartment she was leasing.

“I didn’t appreciate it the first time,” Hannibal continued easily, “so I really hope you’re not planning anything rash, Doctor Du Maurier.”

She was just starting to enjoy living here too – it was just typical that a man would spoil it for her.

“I presume you know what happened this week.”

Yes, she knew, had seen the news, read the articles in the Sun. It was fantastical, in her opinion; FBI profiler (name redacted but who were they fooling, really) walked into a music store on a regular errand, identified an active and notorious serial killer terrorizing Greater Baltimore over the course of fifteen-minutes, tipped off law enforcement only to be attacked and taken hostage, then rescued in the nick of time as officers stormed the shop. The suspect

had attempted to murder the omega's mate in retribution, and left a breadcrumb of bodies in the meanwhile; Tobias Budge was a wanted man. Somewhere in between all of that was the truth.

"I'm going to start seeing patients again on Monday. It's strange, thinking about going back to daily practice, after almost being killed."

"It's good to step away. Even if you only took a few days for yourself," she took a sip of her wine, the initial hit of it sour, almost acrid, "and the family."

"Yes, it was good to have a change of pace," Hannibal's expression became affectionate, though it was tinged with the bittersweet; "I should have taken a week off long before this, back when Will first returned home from the hospital. I've missed him – I see him every day, but sometimes, I feel as though it's not enough; he's been the light of my life for thirteen years, he deserves more from me, and I want to give it to him."

She took a deep sip of the wine, not caring that her head would be swimming within minutes at the rate she was drinking.

"We went fishing over the weekend; Clearbrook Lake. Do you know it?"

She shook her head. The wine softened inexplicable on the pad of her tongue, turning thick and fragrant, unfurling its full richness.

"It was beautiful, I had forgotten how beautiful it could be; we were there several years ago, during the autumn, and it rained horribly – I'm afraid it quite ruined my impression, unfairly it seems."

She tilted her head, bemused at the image that came to mind of Hannibal, shedding his tailored-suit, tie and waistcoat for jumpers, khakis and boots. *The things you did for love…* No, that wasn't him, she decided; he'd wear thick woollen jumpers, zipped at the collar, something long-sleeved and with a label, perhaps Burberry, and those blasted Russian hats of his if it was particularly cold that day.

"The children thoroughly enjoyed themselves, we brought a picnic lunch with us, and stayed at the George Washington in Winchester; Tomas loved the live jazz band they had playing that evening in the lounge. I hadn't wanted to go at first, but it was exactly what we needed to refresh ourselves."

Bedelia Du Maurier took another sip of the admittedly delicious wine, her smile disappearing between one breath and the next like a snuffed candle, quite done with the descriptions of the man playing *happy* family. "Hannibal, why are you here? I ended our professional relationship."

"Yes, you did."

She took an uneasy breath.

“However, I would like to resume my therapy,” the man smiled graciously, “Presuming you’ve returned, of course.”

Of course.

“I apologize for coming over without calling ahead – are you expecting anyone?” The alpha sat up and glanced over his shoulder at the front door, as though he expected someone to arrive at any moment and was completely prepared to make a polite retreat.

She looked away to the window which looked out onto dim streets, washed in blue-light, those five-minutes of twilight just before the streetlights came on, “No, I’m not.”

“You kept my standing appointment open,” the alpha noted with a bemused air.

“And you are right on time,” she quipped, dry.

Hannibal Lecter’s mouth stretched in a demure pleased smile, deliberately obtuse.

“What I said to you when I resigned from my role as your therapist, Hannibal, it still stands; I don’t believe that I can help you.”

“Because I’m wearing a Person Suit?”

Bedelia Du Maurier gave a mirthless smile, “I thought we’d agreed to call it your Human Shield.”

The other psychiatrist’s eyes creased in good-humor, an action so quick that it could have been a trick of the eye, before returning to a more serious, ponderous expression.

“I think you’re wrong, Doctor Du Maurier,” Hannibal stated, scenting his wine with great appreciation, his voice soft but firm, “I believe there’s still much you could offer me, both as a colleague and as my therapist.”

She raised a sceptical eyebrow, a tremor line in the curve of her smile.

“You were also attacked,” Hannibal pointed out. “You know what it’s like, the fear I experienced, and the unreality of walking away alive.”

She took a deep breath, and looked away, checking her wristwatch; was it really only just five o’clock? “Our situations were vastly different.”

“Not really,” Hannibal studied the dark liquid in his glass, “It’s easy to understand why you retired after the experience. Now that you’re back, are you considering a return to psychiatric work?”

“I am already engaged in psychiatric work, Hannibal – I’m your husband’s therapist.”

“Two patients isn’t a practice,” the alpha chided, blithely ignoring the reference to his unwelcome intrusion.

Bedelia Du Maurier tipped her head to drain her wineglass of its last sip, rolling the rich spicy taste it around her mouth to avoid replying, enjoying the use of her tongue for something other than speech.

“I feel terrible for what happened to John,” Hannibal heaved a lingering sigh, then as an aside, “He was my patient’s bodyguard, and came into my office after hearing the commotion – his vigilance to his duty saved my life.”

She stood to refill her glass. “The news reported that his throat was slit by a scalpel.”

The glass bottle was heavy in her grasp, despite being almost half-empty now.

The alpha nodded sadly, “Yes, and that is a lesson to me not to keep such dangerous implements out in the open; honestly, I’ve gotten so used to having them there to sharpen the points on my pencil, I completely lost sight of how dangerous they could be in the wrong hands. In a way, his death is on me.”

She retook her seat. The alphas each took a sip of their wine, holding one another's gaze.

“Do you believe yourself guilty of his death?”

Hannibal looked up to the ceiling, wistful. “I feel a sense of responsibility, yet I could never have predicted the events that would transpire, or that my scalpel would be used so cruelly.”

“You tried to save him.”

“Yes,” He glanced away, giving a pensive little huff, “His fate could have been mine, after all. Or Will’s.”

The alpha’s expression of anguish was shockingly alien on the usually confident, almost-cocky features of Hannibal Lecter. It was perfectly-constructed, awash with tragedy and pathos, no matter which angle she turned it. The alpha female stared, fascinated because always, *always Will Graham*.

She’s tempted to ask the alpha how it felt, that brief moment when it was clear that his foe had fled, that he couldn't save the bodyguard, and that he was going to live, then coming to the realization that his mate (his obsession, really) whom if injured past a certain point of human physiological tolerance, could not be repaired, remade, or replaced, might have already left this realm. Will Graham, for a period of several minutes, was both dead and alive.

It made her wonder; had he wailed at the thought of losing his beloved Will? Gnashed his teeth? Cried, perhaps? Had he been as lost and vulnerable as any other who had ever loved deeply, wholeheartedly and lived in perpetual fear of having that love ripped away? Married thirteen-years, and still, Hannibal was as infatuated as ever.

“Everyone has an intrinsic responsibility for their own life, Hannibal. No one can take on that responsibility. Not even you.”

The alpha looked to the window, to the streetlights coming on in a cascade of yellow. “Did you take responsibility when you were attacked by your patient?”

She pressed her lips together for a moment. Hannibal's gaze swung from the window and locked onto hers.

"Yes." She held his gaze, looking neither to the left nor the right, "But I don't take responsibility for his death."

The alpha finished the last of his wine, and gave a satisfied glance to the now-empty glass. "Nor should you."

His eyes swung to hers. The man smiled charmingly.

"Next week then?"

In answer, Bedelia Du Maurier took another sip of wine.

Will threw back the last of his whiskey and turned his back on the room. He didn't know why he was here. Well, he knew, but how the hell did he get himself into these things. Signalling for another drink, he kept his eyes on the bar as another patron arrived, bracing himself for yet another session of 'you poor things, I heard all about what happened.'

The elderly beta gentleman gave him a warm smile but thankfully left without comment upon receiving his two orders of Rob Roy, disappearing back into the crowd before reappearing next to a young woman, with enough resemblance between them that she was probably his daughter. They had a chuckle together before sipping their drinks in unison, the daughter breaking off to comment on something or someone she'd seen, spinning around to point off to the side.

"Your drink, sir."

He turned back to the bar and smiled a thank-you to the college-aged beta who served him, her dark hair twisted in a beehive atop her head.

Taking his time now that he'd had a moment to decompress, Will sipped his second drink slowly. The whiskey wasn't what Hannibal liked to buy for him, but it was still good. Where was his husband anyway, he frowned, turning to scan the room again.

It had only been just a week yesterday, since the whole fiasco with Tobias Budge. They had spent the weekend in the countryside, enjoying a home-prepared picnic on Saturday while exploring the proposed fishing site. Then they'd driven on to Winchester, staying overnight at a lovely historical hotel – the George Washington – with the dogs lodged at a nearby kennel, before heading out on the Sunday morning to Clearbrook Lake.

Tomas and he had fished while the other children had enjoyed playing by the waterside with the dogs under Hannibal's watchful eyes, the alpha looking quite relaxed resting his injured leg on the picnic blanket whenever Will had checked on him. The weather had been blissful,

as warm as a sunny February day could be, allowing them to enjoy another picnic lunch, this time put together by the hotel kitchens under Hannibal's direction, before packing up in the afternoon to head home. By then, he'd felt loose-limbed and almost boneless.

The week had then proceeded as usual, with the only difference being that Hannibal would be home.

At first, he'd been suspicious that the alpha had taken the week's break from his practice to *coddle* him – as if the extensive gentling sessions over the weekend and self-indulgent fishing trip weren't enough to calm him – which was ridiculous, because even Tomas had by Monday morning regained his usual emotional equilibrium. And his shoulder was only bruised; rotation was uncomfortable, yes, but it was nowhere near enough pain to stop him from completing daily tasks.

Then he'd quickly come to the conclusion that this was an extension of the alpha protective instinct – that Hannibal couldn't stand leaving him alone for the week, not so soon after Will's injuries.

He'd expected to grow tired of having the alpha underfoot, but it hadn't happened; while the alpha was extra attentive, sometimes this was nothing more than enjoying each other's silent company as they read, or harmoniously working together to prepare for that night's dinner or tomorrow's breakfast. Hannibal had ducked out twice to run various errands, looking harried each time he returned, as though he'd feared the younger man would disappear in his absence. When he had descended the bowels of the butler pantry to perform his gastronomical experiments, Hannibal reappeared within the hour to scent Will like he hadn't been allowed to touch the omega for days.

It had been… easy, as anything else between them, the shift to being able to freely move in each other's personal space. Things had gone to almost a stand-still while he'd been consumed with the Budge situation, but now that it was resolved – well, more or less. At this point, with the press doing what they did best, when Budge finally poked his head out of whatever hole he'd hidden in, it was going to be blown clear off. Oh the public outcry! The man had been a respected music teacher with access to hundreds of children; how could everyone have been so blind! A serial killer right under our noses all this time! How long had he been active for, Freddie Lounds speculated; there had been not nine victims as previously thought, but over twenty based on preliminary forensics – and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Will took another sip of his whiskey, pausing mid-sip as he finally caught sight of Hannibal. As the alpha made his way through the crowd to join him, he cast his eyes off to the side, a shiver curling through his abdomen. It's as flattering as it was embarrassing, the candor of the alpha's ever-present desire.

As for him, well…he liked the alpha, more importantly, he trusted him, and he did miss having sex – sure, his sex drive was almost non-existent outside of heat season, and his cycle was still out of whack due to carrying Junior, but he couldn't deny that he wanted Hannibal, and feared it too. Like a child faced with the ocean for the first time, caught between excitement and overwhelming uncertainty, shaken despite having the life-jacket, the adults

already in the water proving that it was safe and he wasn't going to sink. Now finally, he was ready to jump, more than ready – he'd been ready since Tuesday.

But in the grand tradition of universal irony, any attempts to go beyond kissing this week were broken up by bumped bruises, jolted wounds and wrenched muscles. Every damn time, they'd ended up sighing, chuckling, or cursing (him, not Hannibal) over their mutual incompetence to get it on, and curled up together instead, kissing between breaths – eyelashes, mouths, eyebrows, that little shaving scar just under the left side of the jaw – tracing the whorls of each others' ears.

Which was nice. He just wanted more.

"Drinking without me?" The alpha asked, mock-hurt.

Will cocked an eyebrow and picked up the flute of champagne that he'd carefully placed next to the wall out of the way and presented it to the man.

Hannibal beamed, lips clamped together lest he laugh; he took the drink but caught Will's hand and brought it up to his mouth, scenting it in that way he did – running his nose along the skin, eyes closed – before pressed a kiss to Will's still-damp fingers, "Thank you."

He inhaled as he felt himself respond, his inner thighs grow warm. Will rescued his hand and took a drink. The alpha followed suit.

"Where'd you go?"

"I saw an old classmate of mine and had to say hello. How about you?"

Will shrugged. Mrs. Mandeville's presence had protected him from the majority of the onslaught in the alpha's absence but had eventually needed to depart for her own rounds of socializing.

"Nothing much. People tried to talk to me, I was antisocial."

Hannibal gave him that slow mesmerizing smile, overflowing with wry affection.

They both broke off their gaze and took a sip of their drinks.

"Did you enjoy the performance?"

It had been in Italian, but the emotions and character dynamics had been easy enough to pick up on – nothing too sad or tragic thank goodness. He nodded and gave a small smile, because yes, he enjoyed it; he wouldn't come on his own or get excited over it, but he'd do it again without dragging his feet. Mainly though, he just enjoyed being in Hannibal's orbit, watching the man enjoy himself so immensely.

"Mrs. Mandeville has invited us to supper – if we are attending, then we should probably join her."

Will hid a sigh and nodded, "Just let me finish my drink."

Hannibal raised his glass to do the same but before he could, he froze and reached inside his inner breast pocket.

It was his cell – specifically, his emergency line for patients.

Putting down the flute, the alpha shot him an apologetic smile then turned on his heel to find some quiet corner to answer it. Will drained the last of his drink, and then drained the last of Hannibal's champagne. Before he'd even had a chance to leave a tip though, the alpha was back with an unreadable expression.

"It's for you," he said, offering him the phone.

Will frowned, an inkling of apprehension in his stomach.

"Hello," he answered.

"Will?" Beverly's voice piped through, thin and reedy due to the steady roar of background chatter.

"Yeah," he looked around for somewhere quiet, and was glad when Hannibal seemed to read his mind and guided him over to a side alcove.

"Listen, you're going to hear this pretty soon on the news, but I wanted to give you a heads up."

His stomach twisted. "What's going on?"

"We just got a report in – they found him, Tobias Budge. He's dead."

Will's eyes fluttered shut as his heart skipped a beat before settling on an excited quick tempo. Dead. Tobias Budge was dead. The knots in his stomach loosened entirely and dropped away. There might be others further down the track, he knew, but the immediate threat was gone. He swallowed thickly and took a deep shivering breath.

Beverly's voice grew louder in confusion at his non response before Hannibal pried the phone out of his stiff fingers and answered for him, listening attentively while nodding before hanging up the phone, promising that he'd ask Will about it.

He covered his face, feeling the grit of salty tears needle at the pads of his fingers. Arms came up around him, enclosing him in warmth and the familiar scent of his alpha. He took a sharp inhale and grabbed Hannibal's shoulders, their faces a mere inch apart.

"Tobias Budge is dead."

Hannibal gave him a concerned look, one arm leaving his waist to cup Will's face. "Yes," he murmured, "So I heard."

What – *who*? How did it happen?

“They don’t have exact details,” the alpha told him, and then at his look of confusion, “Tobias Budge was discovered just outside Greater Baltimore; Miss Katz says that the preliminary report placed time of death at thirty-six hours ago,” and then much more softly, “There were signs of pre-mortem mutilation.”

Someone had gotten to the man first then – but *who*?

Hannibal inhaled against his temple, “The FBI believes that it was the Ripper.”

Chapter End Notes

I had wanted to finish a chapter by Christmas - but I was still just sooo ill it was literally not going to happen. My therapy had only improved me enough that I wasn't vomiting everything I drank and ate, I had no energy to spare for writing if I wanted to make it through the holidays. Then I tried to hit the New Years deadline but even that didn't work out - my parents were on holidays and so I was managing on my own, and I managed to write heaps but not enough.
.....Also I might have been distracted by the BBC Sherlock special at the local cinemas lol

I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter - I love comments so please talk to me
I don't know if I can return to one chapter a week due to my continuing health issues (but fingers crossed I found an awesome therapist who can do the treatment I need) - and that the chapters are getting longer...
But I love writing this story and am very very grateful to everyone who wished me well - sorry I didn't reply to you, I just thought to myself, spend time writing the story? Or spend time replying to comments? Yeah, obvious choice there :)

Now I know there's no grand opera anymore in Baltimore (I researched, fastidiously) and that if Hannibal were real in our RL world he'd need to go to Washington DC to get an opera fix that's more in suiting with his fussy tastes, but this is fiction
I have tried as much as possible, as always, to use real details (Clearbrook Lake, The George Washington Hotel, Kellermeister Wild Witch Shiraz etc - go google them for visual aids) - but I fudged this one, mea culpa

And of course, Happy New Years folks! I have survived and so have you

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Chapter Summary

When the Ripper puts on a show, he goes all out...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title - Nothing is more expensive than free

This is unbetad. I am not satisfied with it actually, and consider it a draft, but a good friend tells me that's just my mopey-ness talking. Please enjoy it anyway.
Non-explicit sex - twice! It's a special occasion.
I'm sorry about the profuse use of italics in the first scene but its very difficult to play around with the amount of imagery I want, to match what gets done on the show with all the edit cuts - as a general rule, if I used italics in large blocks, it's a flashback

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 5 Feburary 2016

“Margot? Stay with me, stay with me.”

Margot Verger opened her eyes, head throbbing, sluggish. Don’t touch me, she wanted to yell, don’t touch me; but she could barely move, couldn’t even hold herself upright. She’s aware of being pulled out of the wreckage, glass bristling and singing as they fell off her in a cascade of sparkles, cradled against a strong chest as she was carried from where she’d been thrown to the sofa against the wall. She saw the glimmering outline of a man from beneath her eyelashes, hulking and almost grotesque; the pain hammering at her skull drowned out everything else and made her want to retreat to the dark. But she was aware – she knew – she *remembered.*

She remembered being flung to the side like nothing; the grunts of a vicious fight as she had struggled onto her hands and knees, rattled; the shower of glass washing over her as the men threw fists, kicks and furniture at each other, gnawing through her pantyhose as she scurried away on her hands and knees, terrified. She had witnessed the alpha breaking the intruder’s arm, pressing his advantage until the stranger was on the floor, gasping like a suffocating fish; the psychiatrist had pulled out his pocket square like a magician doing a trick, picked up a small statue and brought it down over the man’s head. The beta’s twitches had stopped then.

Margot remembered every detail, every vicious bloodless moment, the CLUNK as the alpha tossed the cast-iron statuette of a stag aside, satisfaction etched over his patrician features.

The man checked his watch, his expression shifting to one of annoyance; he rubbed a thumb over it, rubbing at the dried blood. “In approximately one minute, the police and paramedics will arrive.”

She nodded with no awareness, no true understanding of anything being said. Her head ached.

“He attacked me,” Doctor Lecter was breathing heavily, his face terrifying blank.

“He- he attacked you,” she repeated, voice hoarse, uncertain.

Her uncertainty displeased him. She knew it in the same way that she knew Mason’s smiles were false. An animal instinct. A survival instinct.

“He was going to kill you,” the psychiatrist told her, neatly folding up his pocket square before sliding it back into its usual place. He peered down at his folded handkerchief critically before smoothing a finger over it. He inspected the body on the floor coolly as his hand expertly dishevelled his collar, twisted his tie. When he was done, he looked like a man taken off-guard, not the victor of a clearly uneven fight.

He reminded her a reptile, a cold-blooded throwback armed with teeth and muscle, nothing but smoke and water until he decided to take a chunk out of you.

She froze as he turned that cold gaze upon her.

“This is where it gets a bit tricky,” he said with clear bemusement, advancing upon her.

Doctor Lecter snapped his fingers in front of her eyes and she jolted, adrenalin igniting a fire in her. “What-? No!” She started but he shushed her, a dry palm curling over her mouth; she felt like she was suffocating.

“You must remain calm, Margot,” Doctor Lecter told her, face filled with the sternness of professional competence, the cadence of his smooth cultured voice making her want to obey him, “The danger is over, you’re safe.”

She nodded, silenced by the soft touch upon her lips as effectively as if she had been muzzled. Her eyes stung but she couldn’t move, could barely blink. The alpha studied her, eyes soft, before letting go, stepping back. Margot Verger drew in a shaken breath and tried to sit up.

“Slowly,” the man instructed, “Slowly now, Margot – you’ve hit your head so you might be dizzy, so take it very slowly.”

She swallowed. Yes. Yes, she’d hit her head (No, no, she’d begged in the cage of her mind, scared as the doctor told her he had to do this, and he would be thankful if she complied – *it will hurt, but you’ll live*). Her eyes frantically scanned the room. Broken glass, moved furniture, blood and items knocked askew, scattered like autumn leaves upon the floor.

There's no sign of the intruder, the Afro-American beta who had stormed in halfway through her usual Friday session and tried to kill her psychiatrist.

"What the hell-?" The door to the private exit slammed open. John stood in the doorway, eyes wide with shock as he took in the scene. Doctor Lecter turned, his hands remaining clamped over her shoulder in solidarity (I wouldn't tell a soul; do you promise, he asked serenely, face calved from solid marble.)

"Is everything alright? Oh God…"

"It's okay," Margot said, breathless, "It's okay, John."

Her bodyguard, good old John, John the dishonoured cop, John the man with the little girl and the gambling habit and the propensity for bad decisions, John who watched over her from 7 to 3 every Monday to Friday, and turned a blind eye to the bruises she wore whenever she slunk into the backseat of the Rolls Royce, stared at her like she was crazy. She wanted to laugh.

"John," Doctor Hannibal Lecter said, "This man is mentally unstable, and needs immediate medical attention. Could you help me move him please?"

"Is that safe? I mean – oh God – is he okay?"

"He will be," the doctor assured.

The bodyguard cautiously came closer to the body lying on the floor, his brows creased in uncertainty. "Doc, I don't think he's breathing. Oh crap – we need to call the cops."

"And we will – right after you helped me move him," Doctor Lecter said, his tone of voice so reasonable, so genteel that it almost seemed lunacy to refuse him, "I am a trained emergency surgeon, John; I have a private sickbay set up with a cot and the necessarily medical supplies to help him – but I need *to move him."*

John stared at the alpha, indecisive before nodding.

Hannibal Lecter took a deep breath and allowed his face to fill with worry and compassion as he remained kneeling by the side of her couch, calling out for paramedics to attend to her when they stormed the room. She had been thrown through a glass coffee-table, he told them, she suffered a sycopal episode but it had been brief, a minute at most.

The alpha stood gingerly with assistance from one of the medics, leaving her draped across the powder-blue Rococo chair against the wall, the paramedics' voices washing over her as they asked her questions and spoke to each other, breaking out their equipment. Doctor Lecter limped slowly to sit upon the corner of his desk so that one person could staunch the blending in his leg, while another peeled back the torn shirt sleeve to examine his lacerated forearm. He smiled ruefully with his usual debonair charm and joked that instead of the painkillers, if someone could please be so kind as to fetch him a drink from his hidden bar fridge – it was that kind of day.

The paramedics tending to him chuckled.

Margot Verger closed her eyes, and felt the sting of salt threading through her eyelashes.

When she opened them again, there were police officers and people in FBI jackets spread through the room, the click and bang of flash photography lighting up the corners.

“John saved my life,” Doctor Lecter told the police officers who were first on the scene, wincing at the sting of antiseptic on his wounded forearm; a paramedic heaved an angry sigh at some missing item from her bag and announced that she would be right back. “He came in and distracted my attacker.”

But that’s not what happened.

Her hands clamped over her mouth, trying to stifle her scream as the alpha slashed John’s throat, the movement so fast that it seemed one moment he was closing the door to the private exit and then the next, a streak of black jetted out of John’s neck. The ex-cop made a desperate wet cry and fell to the floor, his eyes flung wide in shock. Doctor Lecter sank to his knees and reached for the bodyguard while John’s limbs flailed, trying to get away. The man’s chest heaved, his eyes wild, throat gurgling as blood tore its way out of him. The red spread across the floorboards, soaked its way into her white scarf, now stained forever as her psychiatrist tried to staunch the bleeding. Doctor Lecter pressed down with one hand and checked his watch with the other, his expression ponderous. Help me*, John Warszawski’s eyes implored, before they lost focus and rolled up to gaze blankly at the ceiling, dimming to black.*

Doctor Lecter exhaled and slowly stood. His face was peaceful.

Margot Verger gulped down breath after breath between her fingers as her body locked up in terror, her guts twisting and pulling and grinding. Her knees creaked and threatened to buckle as the stink of blood, rich, sharp and cloying, invaded her nostrils. She was alone she realized; she was alone in a room with the man who had just slit her bodyguard’s throat without cause or deliberation.

Strong gentle hands cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. Margot raised her eyes slowly. Her psychiatrist tilted his head, his features softening till they’re almost fond. She trembled like a bird in a storm. “You are a survivor, Margot, you’re going to be fine.”

Really?

She wanted to pass out but was too much of a coward to do it.

“The intruder killed John before making his escape,” he told her, with the absolute certainty of truth.

But that’s not what happened.

Margot swallowed down the urge to vomit as the alpha’s gaze bore into her, his hands holding her face so tenderly she felt like his lover, or his child. He was a father, she thought

in a daze, static roaring in her head making it hard for her to think, wasn't he? He had four children, including a two-year old little boy with smooth apple-red cheeks – she had just seen him with his younger husband and the little boy just last week, she had seen how his face had lit up at the cry of Papa, his clear adoration of both mate and child. She stared up at the sculpted features of Doctor Hannibal Lecter, and saw nothing of that kind gentle man – something soulless and alien stood where a human being should be.

"It is easy to become confused with a head injury," he remarked casually, as though advising her that she needed to take her medication and eat more red meat.

She stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"You were attacked," he told her, "You were not the target but nevertheless, you became collateral damage, just as John was collateral damage."

She forced herself to not look away, to not beg, as she shrank back into herself. Her eyes were utterly dry.

"Please know, Margot, that if I could, I would spare you the discomfort but John forced my hand when he rang the police," Doctor Hannibal Lecter said tonelessly, with the calculation of someone used to the tabulations of life and death. "It will be in your best interests to forget what occurred. Can you do that, Margot? I would consider it a favor, and you know I always repay favors."

Yes, she swallowed thickly, she believed him; she remembered Mason.

"He escaped while I attempted to save John's life."

Almost as if he could hear her thoughts, the alpha paused in his performance and glanced at her. Margot's skin prickled with fear.

She looked to the side with the nonchalance of the regularly traumatized and wiped a shaky hand through her hair, oily and tangled with blood. The paramedics got up to examine her head again, concerned by the stain of red on her fingers. The woman asked for permission to touch her scalp, that they were going to feel for any bumps now – please let her know if something hurts. The other medic found a penlight and told her they were going to check her pupils, hold still – she whimpered, because her headache worsened at simply the idea of it – it'll be over in a second, the man assured her, it won't hurt, trust me…

"Do you trust me?" Doctor Lecter asked, as cool and as collected as ever, covered in the blood of one man, responsible for the bludgeoning of another.

It only took a moment for her to make up her mind; she's lived with the likes of her father, survived the worst of Mason, she knew the value of giving the correct answer. Margot nodded with military precision, a slight tilt of her chin that her papa had said was discrete, lady-like and proper, trying to cling to dignity even as she trembled uncontrollably.

Doctor Lecter's eyes creased, his expression almost-proud.

“This will hurt,” he told her tenderly, hand curling over her neck, “But you’ll live.”

The Present

The harbor water taxi service was closed until March but somehow, the FBI had managed to charter a ride for them to meet up with harbor patrol, whom drove them the rest of the way across the bay onto northern Kent County. Will hid his face in the crook of Hannibal’s neck as the shore sped by in a blur of fragmented light, the beacons of civilisation growing smaller and smaller as they pulled out into the middle of the water, until they were mere specks, star-like. He would have enjoyed being out on the bay, if it wasn’t so cold, and if he wasn’t heading out to a crime scene. The trip passed quickly though it must have been an hour, his mind in a frozen daze as he digested the idea that the Ripper had killed Tobias Budge.

Was this confirmation that the Ripper knew him? Knew him as he had been, that whisper of fear in the corridors at Quantico as another class of trainees prepared to graduate? Hannibal pressed a nose to his hair as they swayed together in the dark of the FBI sedan, his hand possessive over Will’s thigh. At the first flash of orange streetlamps over his forearm, he pulled away and turned to face the front. The alpha’s hand sought his in the shadows and squeezed; Will squeezed back.

From the driver’s seat, the young FBI agent who was their escort glanced back to advise them that they were almost there. The alpha murmured a quiet thank you.

Five-minutes later, the car slowed to a crawl as it came upon a blockade of vehicles, many of them from the local sheriff’s office with their lights still flashing red-and-blue. Over the buzz in his ears, Will exited, stretching his stiff legs in the cool chill of midnight. He distantly heard Hannibal thank the driver and shut the door behind him, heard the driver say that he had to move the car but he’ll be around, just look for him when you’re ready to leave, Doctor Lecter. In a daze, he walked past the cops who glanced at the agent to confirm that the new arrivals had permission to be here then turned back to their conversations; Will walked past forensics who were preparing their lighting gear and sample kits, past the medical examiner’s van, lights on and waiting for action.

He approached the open gates and saw Agent Gracen, who turned to greet him with a breath of relief, because she’s out of her depths and she knew it – she’s got smudges under her eyes from too little sleep, she didn’t expect this at all when she transferred to the BAU and she hadn’t had time to put on any make-up when she’d been dragged out of bed. Maybe she’ll reconsider the career move, he thought, as he listened to her lay out the facts: Tobias Budge was found two-hours ago by teenagers who had scaled the walls of the private garden, which

was closed to the public until spring; the ME placed time of death at thirty-six to forty-eight hours but it was hard to say for sure due to the degradation.

“Animals got to him?”

The reply was business-like but didn’t manage to hide her discomfort, “Birds.”

Nodding faintly, he passed her and headed for the lights through the trees. On his peripheral vision, Agent Moses turned from where he was on his cell, one hand tucked into his coat pockets, eyes tracking Will’s progress. Among the throng of forensic photographers and general lackeys, Beverly Katz turned and straightened at his approach.

“I didn’t know if you’d come,” she offered him a pair of fresh gloves.

“You called,” he pulled them on, “How could I resist?”

It’s the right answer.

She grinned, tired but pleased. She wanted to hug him, because his call during the week to thank her for the part she’d played in making sure he’d survived hadn’t been quite enough to assuage her sense of responsibility – *I told you I’d like to put you in a room with Tobias Budge, not* ***literally*** *go do it! Dammit Graham, you’re crazy, you hear, if you weren't so cute I’d slap you* – but it’s the wrong time and place. They smiled at one another.

“Okay, everyone, take a walk!” Beverly said, raising her voice to be heard over the chatter.

Most of her fellow agents followed the instructions promptly, faces-blank in sleep deprivation. They didn’t want to be here, looking at this gruesome scene, and were glad for the reprieve.

“It’s quite the display,” the alpha female told him, gloves snapping off, “You should prepare yourself.”

“I’m prepared,” he murmured, still keeping his eyes firmly fixed away from the sight that awaited him. “You got confirmation it’s the Ripper?”

“Do you know anyone else who likes this kind of thing?”

Will allowed himself a tiny wry smile as he turned away from her arched eyebrow. No, he supposed there was only one overly-theatrical intelligent psychopath in the Chesapeake Bay area; the Butcher might also display his victims but they were rarely filled with the whimsy, irony or symbolism that the Ripper seemed to revel in.

“Can’t say for certain that a surgical trophy was taken until the autopsy but my guess is something’s missing – hard to tell among all that mess.” She undid her hair from the top-knot she’d thrown it up in. “I’m going to step back, but I’m right here if you need me, okay?”

He nodded and took a deep breath to brace himself for the stench of death as he stepped closer, holding it until his shuffling feet reached an unmistakable stain. Exhaling, Will raised his eyes slowly.

Tobias Budge lay supine, almost bowed in an arch, over the low edge of a moss-covered circular fountain, dry for the winter. A water sprite or perhaps a Vestal with an urn in the circle of her arms, tipped to pour, appeared to lean over the beta's corpse. Since the fountain wasn't running, there was nothing coming out of the urn except for a single droplet of water, blessing the valley between the beta's cheek and nose. *Like a tear.*

Slowly he walked around the corpse, barely daring to breath.

Budge's mouth was open, face-frozen in distant horror, black stones where his eyes should be. His stomach bisected with his organs scoped out and placed almost whimsically around him connected by the stretch of his intestines. Going by the stench and the black spill across the paving stones and the inside of the dry fountain pool, the beta had been alive when he was sliced open and relieved of his innards. Most of the organs and exposed abdominal flesh were pockmarked, damaged, poked and prodded – *pecked away*, Will's mind supplied.

He frowned. "What happened to his hands?"

The Maestro's hands were missing.

Beverly looked up from the digital camera she was reviewing and nodded to the fountain centrepiece. "They were removed."

Will glanced over at her, eyebrows raised. "That's a bit medieval."

"It was cauterized too, needed to keep him alive for the disemboweling," she replied with a grim smile, "You don't see that every day. Sharp and clean – my guess, it was an axe."

Sharpened to be a butcher's cleaver, *sanitized in heaping coals*…

Rounding the fountain, he slowed as he saw what she had been referring to. Rather than a mirror image of the same statue, this maiden held two shallow bowls. It's meant to appear as if she were giving out the water that she had in her balanced bowls – no doubt in the warmer mouths, water would be overflowing from them. Dry for the season, they became resting places for a pristine creamy feather and a pair of severed hands.

"That's an ostrich feather," Beverly said, coming up alongside him, "I did a little touching."

Will turned in her direction but his eyes remained locked on the display. There was something familiar about it…like he'd seen it somewhere…

"It's judgment," he realized, his eyes roaming over the details as they sharpened with context, "According to the ancient Egyptians, the ostrich feather is the symbol of Ma'at, goddess of law and order – well, more or less."

"Wow," she crossed her arms, wry, "You come up with all that on the spot?"

Actually, he'd read a book on ancient Egypt together with Tomas when helping on one of the boy's assignments. To Beverly, he just shrugged; it was nice to keep a little of his mystery. "You're meant to weigh the heart – and if it's as light as Ma'at's feather, you get passage to the underworld."

Ma'at was also an omega. That meant something. He knew it did.

"So what does it mean if you're weighing the hands instead?"

Will took a breath and didn't reply. After a beat, the alpha female left, sensing perhaps that he was done with the chatter now.

He had what he needed. He had the scene, the body, the display. He walked around to the corpse again, let himself look; the blood, the organs, the past and the present.

He let his eyes slide shut despite the hard flutter of his heart, that part of him which shirked from pain fighting against him.

The pendulum dropped.

Will's eyes snapped opened, heart rate dropping dramatically into a steady monotone.

They were deep in the wilderness, with no one to hear them. This was private, killer to killer. Tobias Budge looked up at him with hate-filled eyes, his hands bound before him as he kneeled over a wide stump, his knees and ankles firmly trussed, so he could not hope to move. His mouth moved as his teeth flashed but there was no sound; curses or threats or pleas, it didn't matter; he was a *pig*.

There's an axe in Will's hand – it's hot, almost glowing red. *"I remove his hands, for he does not deserve them. He thinks himself an artist, a craftsman, an equal, but he's nothing but an upstart …"*

Raising the axe above his head, he swung it down.

The beta's face paled and then contorted in pain as his jaw unhinged, displaying the cavernous depths of his throat, his white-white teeth flashing as his neck convulsed in an endless scream. Will couldn't hear him. The thrashing was utterly silent.

The pendulum shifted.

Will pressed gloved fingers to the beta's eye socket, holding open the upper and lower lid with his index and middle fingers. Budge stared up at him, face beaded with sweat, lids red and cracked from gnawing and screaming until all the moisture had left his mouth.

"I remove his eyes, for his insolence…" He shushed Budge as he removed the left eye, and then the right, with deft confident movements. "*He did not know what his eyes beheld, and presumed himself an equal…"*

Red slippery latex-covered fingers picked up a smooth dark stone, with the consistency of a well-sanded river pebble. With purpose, it was pushed into the empty eye-socket and adjusted with delicate little taps until it sat *just right*. "*This is what he shall receive, for his lack of perception…"*

There was another swing of the pendulum, tearing up his surroundings like a raging tornado and dispersing to abandon him in the semi-dark lushness of the garden.

Will looked up, taking a deep breath of sweet clean air. It was almost dawn, and there was a damp chill but no longer so cold – spring was on the way – not that Tobias Budge would live to see it. He lowered his gaze. The beta lay insensate on the ground, drugged or in too much pain from having his hands and eyes removed.

"*I place his hands, removed from him in punishment, to be seen by all…*" The hands were placed together in the bowl, shifted so that they looked as if they were holding one another; the harmony pleased him. He held the ostrich plume before him, and carefully laid it within the sloping-curve of stone so that not a single flick of feather would be disturbed. It was pristine, *beautiful*, as lovely as the one who this was a gift for.

"*He was tested… and found wanting."* Picking him up by the shoulders, Will threw the beta unceremoniously over the fountain pool's wall, hard enough that one could hear a crack in the man's spine. "*This is a warning…"*

"Shit!"

He blinked, startled by the loud curse.

One of the crime scene investigators had dropped their kit and was now busily trying to collect all the spilled samples; several of his colleagues pitched in to help, swarming over the area. Will looked from one thing to another, disoriented from being jerked out of his mental space but stilled when he caught sight of Hannibal. Half-shadowed on the other side of the fountain, his husband watched him carefully despite the corpse, several yards of intestines and a pair of severed hands between them.

When he caught the alpha's eye, Hannibal's face softened – or perhaps it was just his imagination, considering the dimness. Will wanted to smile even though he couldn't, his mind still bristling with the intrusion of every detail, every nuance, because he appreciated the company. It took effort but he forced himself to lower his gaze, to dive deep once more. The FBI agents, the lights, and Hannibal all disappeared.

Tobias Budge's coal black eyes stared up at him before his head lolled to the side, lost in delirium, senses dulled by damage. There's elbow-high gloves on Will's arms, and a scalpel in his right fist.

"I cut you open to reveal what you are…" Kneeling, he pressed the edge of the razor-sharp blade against the heaving chest of the beta. The skin fluttered under his touch, and then convulsed when he dug the blade in. There's no thrashing this time. Nothing but the stretch of overused throat muscles, flexing in the pre-dawn light.

"*He had it coming, this mocking…"*

There's a trickle of scarlet, just a droplet. It turned into a stream as metal flashed in the dimness, carving up the beta with strokes as sure and steady as a surgeon's cut. And when Will finally stood back, it's a cascade of red, *so much red.* There's no time to waste. Reaching inside, ignoring the heat of the organs, their slickness even through the gloves, Will *pulled*.

"I leave him exposed to the elements, under full sight of the heavens, to be food for the birds…" He untangled the man's innards with skill, speed and delicacy. "*This is my punishment, my warning and my gift…"*

Finally, with the organs tossed and draped, Will slowly rose to his feet, back straightening as he looked upon the tableau, a glorious display, worthy of his skills, worthy as a testament to others, worthy to be presented. The Maestro, unravelled…

Dawn struck the horizon, a pinprick of light that stretched outwards into a line of burning brightness, piercing the melancholy veil of night. Will turned to face the sun, entranced by this daily miracle and found his eyes catching upon a dark shadow that rose up out of the treeline like a cloud of smoke. But it's not a shadow nor a blanket of ash. No, it's the *birds*, he realized, an unkindness of ravens sweeping through the pale blue skies as they swelled towards him like an oncoming wave.

For a split second, his eyes widened as he saw the shadow of a man as the ravens gathered up in the air – but then the formation dispersed, scattering in a chaotic swarm of black wings and sharp beaks as the ravens brushed past him to fall upon the corpse in a shimmering screeching tsunami of black.

When they were done, the Maestro would be little more than over-chewed and a wet putrid stain.

"This is my design…"

Will took a shaky breath as he slowly opened his eyes – and controlled his flinch as someone stepped up next to him, breaking the illusion of solitude.

"What do you think, Mister Graham?" Agent Ed Moses asked quietly, voice crisp in the cool midnight stillness.

Behind the fountain centrepiece, Hannibal watched him carefully, the ever-vigilant alpha sentinel. Will shied away from the FBI agent's intent stare and fixated on Ed Moses' familiar navy scarf as he gave a nod, unsettled from being sneaked up on and half-lost in the evidence. Silent, he turned on his heel and wandered away.

Will listened to the chatter, distractedly nursing the coffee that one of the officers had thoughfully brought for them. It's instant, and he'd only taken one sip before deciding against it, but it's a source of warmth in the chill. He rubbed his clammy face and wondered if he should try asking around for some aspirin – his head was aching and he felt like he was

coming down with something. He cast his eyes in Hannibal's direction; he could just make out the man's head and shoulders among the pale circles of artificial light – the alpha was kindly offering his medical services to one of the officers, who had tripped and fallen on an ankle badly during the scour through the dark for further evidence.

He could hear Ed Moses in quiet discussion with Gracen and an agent he didn't know. She thought that the Ripper had gone after Budge due to a territorial dispute (*what the hell was this, David Attenborough?*) that the Maestro had stepped on some toes by operating in the same area. Gracen's picked up on the punishment aspect of the display, but not the others; but then, he supposed one had to have a special mind-set to be able to see how the beta being dead and disembowelled could be *more*.

Will squeezed the paper cup in his hand until he could feel it straining.

No, this wasn't just a punishment, and not just a warning – this was a *gift*…

An *offering*, to *him*.

"Someone didn't like the serenade."

The three FBI agents all turned to look at him, whatever wheels that had been turning in their heads stopped mid-motion. Had Budge's sick 'serenade' really been for the Chesapeake Ripper? They're entertaining the possibility, he could see, and following that possibility avidly down the paths it could go.

"So he was trying to communicate with the Ripper?" Gracen asked.

No, Budge was trying to communicate with me – outwardly, Will nodded. "And the Ripper didn't approve."

The Chesapeake Ripper had torn into the Maestro for what he tried to do to Will, who he considered to be a – what were they? Allies? Mentor and protege? Colleagues? *Friends*? Something else entirely? Intelligent psychopathic sadists did not murder annoying potential-blackmailers for just anyone. How intimately had Will known him? Did they appreciate each other's works from afar, or had they engaged one another? Had the Ripper ingratiated himself into Will's life? Had Will known the Ripper as the Ripper knew him?

The unknown agent, a tall alpha in his early thirties with handsome Middle-Eastern features, frowned in confusion, "If the Ripper didn't like what was happening, why didn't he do anything before now? After all, there's been nine body drops – if he was going to respond, shouldn't he have done it earlier?"

He glanced at the alpha out of the corner of his eye and noted the lack of wedding ring, the well-groomed dark hair brushed back in a way that Hannibal sometimes wore his hair, the clean-crisp lines of the man's suit peeking out from his coat – not bespoke, but it's good-quality and tailored to fit him snugly.

"The Ripper didn't know who he was – but once the news announcements went out, the Ripper had a name, a face and a profile. He's an intelligent psychopath with resources," Will

gestured vaguely at the murder display, clearly sarcastic, “He got to work, evidently.”

There was the sound of someone stepping up behind him and Will leaned into the touch on his back, turning to acknowledge Hannibal’s tiny smile with a feeble one of his own.

“Tobias Budge was found to be low-class, unworthy, he had no right,” No right to demand Will’s allegiance, and even more so, no right to avenge his wounded pride when he was refused; Tobias Budge’s death warrant had been guaranteed, one way or another, from the moment that Will had entered the beta’s shop. “He was a pest to swatted.”

“And I thought my chem class tutor was a hard-ass,” came Beverly’s familiar wry tone, having caught the last few lines of conversation as she left her fellow forensics specialists to join their brainstorming session.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Hannibal whispered in the shell of his ear; Will glanced over his shoulder, his eyes meeting the alpha’s in a moment of absurd humor. “Good evening Miss Katz – or is that good morning?”

He shifted surreptitiously closer to his alpha’s warmth as belated greetings were made – Hannibal leaned around him to shake hands, but kept a hand on his lower back, possessive in the presence of so many unknowns – and they were finally introduced to Special Agent Jean-Paul Nasser, who had recently joined the team. Both alphas sized one another up but evidently found each other unthreatening; Hannibal, having already secured a mate and sired children, was firmly placed into the mentor-category by the younger alpha.

Will allowed his hand to be tucked into the crook of his husband’s arm, for the alpha to make their goodbyes. He managed a departing smile for Beverly Katz and nods for the others but couldn’t quite meet anyone’s eyes, his mind already filled with enough snakes to rattle. It’s a relief to lean into Hannibal’s side and be led out of there.

His specter stayed behind, crossed-legged before the tableau, lost in admiration.

At some point, he dozed off in the stuffy warmth of the sedan, his head aching dully, and had to be shaken for the transfer to the boat. The ride across the water was silent as they sat huddled together against the pervasive dampness and the sharp bite of the wind. When they arrived back in Baltimore, it’s past two in the morning and Will had long-lost feeling in his fingers and toes. Thankfully, the pre-arranged taxi was waiting as promised and they were home merely twenty-minutes later.

He removed his half-sodden coat as soon as he cleared the threshold and dropped it over a decorative chair. He stripped off his scarf and tie next, winding the tie around his hand as he climbed the stairs silently up to the bedroom. Behind him, he heard Hannibal hanging up their coats before following him. The cufflinks came off, tossed onto the coffee table in front of the gas fireplace, which the alpha switched on to his relief. The belt was next, followed by his suit jacket, both draped over the clothes rack just inside their walk-in wardrobe. In the background, Hannibal mirrored him, divesting himself of his chilled-through opera finery.

Behind the curve of his ears, he heard them – Will froze mid-motion, afraid to breathe – their squawks and their titters, the wet sloppy sounds of flesh tearing as one went left and another

went right, their heads thrown back in joy as rich meaty human slithered down their throats. His fingers trembled unmoving over the buttons of his shirt.

Warm hands curled over his arms, rubbing up and down. Like something had been wrenched out, Will exhaled; it's a far gentler way to be brought back to the world around him than an angrily honking car horn or worse.

"You're still shivering."

"I'm fine," he deflected, baring a stretch of throat for the alpha.

"You're chilled through, Will," Hannibal frowned.

Considering that they hadn't dressed at all for a trip out onto the bay, it's hardly surprising. Turning him around, the alpha placed a hand over his cheek, the warmth making him lean into the touch.

"Are you sure you're alright? You said you had a headache before."

He tried to shrug it off, his fingers fumbling with his shirt buttons, "It's okay, I just need a shower," but Hannibal remained unconvinced.

Will experienced a momentary shyness as he was directed to strip and shower while the alpha ran a bath. He'd tried to tell the man that he could manage on his own, that Hannibal should look after himself, but somehow they end up replaying their roles. It's not the same as being brought back from a sleep-stroll through the streets of Baltimore, shaken and embarrassed in nothing but his t-shirt, shorts and Hannibal's coat, but he felt equally unsteady. Shouldn't he be rejoicing?

Tobias Budge was dead. Dead as a doornail. Dead as last year's clothes in Hannibal's wardrobe. Dead as a herring. Yet all Will felt was off-kilter and anxious.

Perhaps it was the chill. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the Ripper considered him a *friend*.

"I have the urge to apologize," he said over the sound of the running shower.

The pitter-patter died away and Hannibal gave him a curious look as he padded out, unashamed in all his nakedness with casual confidence; Will glanced away before his eyes betrayed him by sneaking a glance.

"What for?" Hannibal asked, bemused.

A hot flush crept up over his chest and cheeks, hotter than even the heat of the bath he had been placed in but he managed to meet the man's gaze. He couldn't help where his eyes drifted though – to muscular thighs dusted in fine hairs, a defined pair of buttocks – as the alpha slowly lowered himself into the tub, making a throaty hum of pleasure.

"For ruining the evening…" He exhaled on a breath that he hadn't even realized he was holding, caught between arousal and the steady low-grade headache that was chipping away

at the back of his skull since they'd left Kent County; "Sorry."

There's a flutter of feathered-wings; Will ignored it.

"The apologies must stop," came Hannibal's teasing low rumble as the man settled back against him between his legs. Will leaned forward to press his forehead against the man's wet nape, tension leaking out of him like a pricked balloon as he breathed, his ribs grazing Hannibal's back with every inhale. Despite the strong fragrance of the bath oils, there was still a lingering hint of spice and smoke to the salt of the alpha's skin. The scent sank into him, calming the guzzling boil behind his eyes.

"Yeah well…I can't imagine this was your idea of a good evening."

"I don't know," Hannibal murmured, tone playful as he ran a hand through his hair to slick it back out of his face. "We had a wonderful time at the opera and a lovely trip on the harbor."

And a tension-fraught car ride to a mysterious location with a mutilated corpse waiting for them.

He kissed the man's neck, guilty.

Across the harbor, his specter did another circuit of the Ripper's latest display – the water-bearer, the balanced bowls, the beautiful ostrich feather, the garland of intestines, the symphony of pecking ravens. His skin pimpled and he shivered despite being in a hot bath as he sank back in the water, back, back, *back*, until he's back there…

Will raised his chin up from where he was kneeling, hands soaked in blood and bile, to see the cold serene features of the maiden cast in stone. The urn's last droplet wavered and fell, pulled by gravity and ripped asunder from its watery hoard. His eyes flickered shut as the droplet landed on his cheek – cold enough to burn – it was not sadness, no, it was benediction, it was blessing, it was –

"Isn't that what everyone does these days?" The alpha continued, shifting against his chest to get comfortable, "A dinner and a show?"

Will inhaled sharply, disorientated but mustered up a smile when the alpha turned to check on him. He tipped forward till their foreheads were pressed together and closed his eyes; he knew the man was wearing that smile of his, the one that always dared Will to say something irritating just to pierce its bubble, that illogical, unfathomable fondness.

"There will be at least two more bodies," he whispered, because Hannibal needed to understand that there were going to be more excursions in Will's future, possibly at inconvenient times; that their lives would be disrupted.

"You seem certain."

"The Ripper kills in sounders of three," he murmured, toneless even as his mind flashed back to a dozen crime scene photos, tucked in between the smooth off-yellow cardboard of a manila folder, to be pulled out and gazed upon in secret like dirty pictures.

There's blood and the blue-blush of death – but therein ended the similarities to the usual homicide. A woman flayed and stuffed with straw in a farmer's field; a man pierced with a hundred tools in his workshop to look like the Wounded Man; a chef with his skull cleaved in half like a melon, scooped out and filled with punch, pineapple wedges bobbing like rubber ducks, his right-arm severed and posed to serve the cup held by his left-hand, the limbs rising up behind the seated-corpse like antlers…

It's more art than murder. It's bizarre, macabre, *fantastical*.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, as if he could scrub the images away. "In fifteen years he's never broken pattern before."

Hannibal shifted against him, head heavy on Will's shoulder.

"I hear he's a true sociopath."

Such a limited perspective, but that was the FBI for you.

(What was he then, a small quiet voice queried, what was his pathology? Everyone had an origin story, even if it was as simple as a cell mutating in the womb, the sad, unfortunate fact of being born.)

"That's because they don't know what else to label him," Will quietly scoffed, and then with a frown, "Did you ever consult on the case?"

"The Ripper?" The alpha's hand found his and tangled their fingers together over his breastbone, those strong clever fingers rubbing over the grooves between his knuckles. "No, but you've spoken about it before – I believe that for the sake of security, only Alana, Doctor Chilton and yourself have ever been brought in on the case."

He frowned at the reference to the general administer of Baltimore State and wondered with some discomfort if they'd known each other beyond professional acquaintances when he'd entered the man's dubious care three-years ago; if the man had ever witnessed him working a scene, and held more than just mild professional curiosity about his peculiar skill-set…

His stomach lurched. Did Frederick Chilton enjoy having access to his head twenty-four seven for three entire months? The revulsion that rose up inside of him felt brittle and puckered with red. And then tentative relief, because the man had found nothing despite all his probing – a wave of unease crested in his chest – or perhaps he did find something and just didn't know what it was.

"I guess I should be honored then."

Sarcasm didn't belong here, in the humid intimacy of a shared bath, but Hannibal only gave a bemused smile and lazily kissed the side of his neck. Will felt its tingle and shifted as his body grew hyper-aware, his ire diffusing into a different sort of energy.

"You've been very busy in the study recently."

"I'm preparing myself."

It's true enough. Just not for class.

"You told me once that you taught on the Ripper – is that still on the syllabus?"

He allowed himself a sardonic chuckle, because yes, he apparently did – he'd even written a majority of the materials used for that particular case study, not that he remembered any of it. Will had read his own personal notes enough times that he knew exactly what he was thinking when he had written them. And the Ripper case study? At this point it was almost elevated to a pet-hobby, the amount of time he'd devoted to it; he supposed there was a lot of material to sink his teeth into – and he wasn't surprised that he had gotten a taste for it.

"He'll have characteristics of a sociopath – no remorse, no guilt," he quoted, almost word-for-word from his own writings, "but he'll have a steady job, no troubles with the law, and have no issues maintaining a social life and even close familial ties."

There was a short silence as the alpha took in the profile. "So what you're saying is, he'll appear normal to everyone, including those closest to him."

He quirked a mirthless smile, "No one would be able to tell what he is."

The irony hit him a split-second after he said it.

"That sounds more like someone with psychopathic tendencies."

Except psychopaths who committed crimes did so for personal gain – the black widow who killed her husband for the life-insurance; the man who killed his wife so he could keep the house, the kids and the car, and marry a woman younger and more fitting with his self-perceived success; the couple who poisoned the parents to inherit; the corporate-ladder climber orchestrating drug overdoses for his peers at debauched sex parties to cut out the competition, and other such charmers.

"He's not a psychopath."

The alpha glanced back at him, a wry curve to his lips. "I suppose that would be too easy."

Will almost snorted. One thing the Ripper wasn't was easy.

There's absolutely no reason to go through the trouble of abducting a luxury kitchenware company rep, taking the effort to surgically remove her kidneys before flaying the skin from her limbs, surgically removing her muscles and filling her with straw before sewing her back up, and mounting her on a pole in the middle of a farm field. It's imaginative, vindictive and personal. The Ripper could even be considered a vigilante – if one bought into his idea of why his victims all deserved to be taken out – something that a psychopath wouldn't care for.

It's hard to not be impressed with the level of meticulous planning, how the man was able to move invisibly in and out of buildings, his forethought in setting up his display in the field right before a torrential downpour washed away even a hint of his car treads…

Hannibal captured the younger man's hand and nuzzled against the delicate skin of Will's wrist before pressing a slow sensual kiss there, like a brand. "If he's neither a sociopath nor a

psychopath, then what is he?"

Will wanted to change the subject but his brain felt almost stuck, like a skipping track. The words tore themselves from his mind, entered his trachea and flirted over the pad of his tongue. "Someone who took out the trash…and elevated them to art."

Like he's floating underwater, he felt the alpha press slow lingering kisses to his fingers. Will tensed but didn't pull away, though every single touch between wet lips and his pruned fingertips seemed to set off a spark under his skin. His arousal swirled together with his uncertainty; the dark corners of the bathroom seemed to encroach upon him and he huddled even closer.

"Probably anger-management issues," he murmured against Hannibal's shoulder, shutting his eyes against the shadows, "It's nothing obvious… he's too controlled for bad flares of temper or to be abusive in any way, but you can see it; his disdain for the victims… They're 'pigs' for him, the displays are their shaming for undignified behavior …"

Will's voice tapered off as the image came to him again, the feather, so delicate and white and yet so heavy with meaning…

"What could they have done?" The alpha mused, hot breath against his jaw, startling him. He hadn't even noticed Hannibal turning to lie in the crook of his neck.

The alpha tipped his head back, catching his startled gaze, "Will?"

He jerked as he felt the teasing touch over his thigh, incredulous as he blurted out, "Are you *getting off* on this?"

Rather than any denials or embarrassed admissions, Hannibal merely hummed with contentment, eyes fluttering to half-mast, "You sounded like you were practicing for a lecture – by all means, don't let me interrupt."

He glanced away with an unwanted blush before meeting the heavy-lidded gaze. It's the slow winding culmination of weeks spent together, getting to know the little things – Hannibal's scaly elbows, that he liked to scent the nape of Will's neck where the last wisps of hair curled from, that Will liked the weight of Hannibal's arm over him, a safety measure against unconscious midnight excursions. It's almost inevitable to gravitate towards each other, mouths melding as hands found slippery bare flesh. Will breathed into it when the alpha reached up to cup his cheek, slowing the kiss into something soft, until they were sipping from each other's lips. When they finally pull apart for air, he licked his tingling lips.

"I think I'm warm enough," he whispered, his stomach tight with nerves.

Maybe he's not being as come-hither as he thought he was, or perhaps staring at his knobby knee bobbing up out of the water wasn't where he should have been staring – because the subtle invitation went straight over the alpha's head.

"Five more minutes," Hannibal murmured, relaxing back against him.

For a shocked moment, Will was at a loss – then his tension bubbled out of his chest like something frothy, because how absurd was it that he couldn't even get his own husband to realize when he was asking for sex.

Affection burst out from somewhere deep down where it ached, warm and strange all at once. It's been happening frequently these days; whenever Hannibal's eyes sought his out in a crowd; whenever the alpha rolled over and reached for him still half-asleep in the middle of the night because he was shaken by his dreams, murmuring distractions despite his exhaustion; and whenever the man was so proud to have him on his arm – like tonight, at the opera, when Hannibal couldn't keep his eyes off him when the stage curtains were down.

The alpha made a noise of deep satisfaction as Will draped himself across his back, arms sneaking under his arms to curl over the ribs. "Don't be long," he whispered, pressing his mouth to the alpha's damp shoulder as he got out.

Hannibal hummed in agreement and settled back against the rim of the tub.

Though he's almost expecting the tug on his hips as he finished brushing his teeth, Will elbowed Hannibal back to shift the alpha's wandering hands to somewhere less ticklish. This only encouraged the man, whose reflection threw him a mischievous look as a hand slipped under the towel to cup a buttock. Will clung to the front of the towel even as he broke out in a sudden laugh which was quickly stifled, mindful of waking the children.

"It's late."

Hannibal pressed an insistent hardness against him, hand sliding to palm Will's answering erection, "I believe you mean it's early."

"It's nearly three."

"Hmm…we have time…" Hannibal pressed his face into the damp curls just behind his ear. The alpha kissed his neck, his jaw, humming with pleasure when Will turned into it, towel abandoned to the floor to comb his hands through wet hair.

The truth was they had no time; in a few hours, they would have to go downstairs to make breakfast for the children and walk the dogs, buy groceries. But Will could forget all that when Hannibal kissed him so ferociously that his mouth hurt from it.

It's almost boiling hot under the covers despite the late hour chill. The mussed covers shifted and scratched together with every undulation, every thrust, as hungry hands skimmed across damp sensitive skin. Will breathed between wet, feverish kisses as their hips shifted, rolling rocks that turned into sharper thrusts until he's biting back whimpers against Hannibal's shoulder. He kept expecting to be turned onto his belly, to be mounted – because that's what all alphas wanted, to get their hooks so deep that you couldn't shake them free. But when it didn't come he's relieved - and strangely disappointed.

Hannibal's muffled grunts, and his eyes, aglow in the darkness, devouring the sight of Will astride him, his hands slack under the pressure of Will's palms, an alpha in mate-appeasement mode. It's enough; Will's eyes screwed shut as he fell into the alpha's chest, his mouth

softened in a silent cry, paralysed by the sharp sweet pleasure of climax. Hannibal's arms held him tight through it, tight enough that Will wanted to weep from how good it was – yes, he wanted to say, yes hold me like that.

Dazed from the after-echoes of pleasure, his hand groped for the other man's cock. Hannibal hissed at the sloppy strokes, hips jerking – and came with a low wretched grunt, the animal satisfaction of it slapping him across the face.

For several minutes, neither of them moved, the exhaustion of sex trembling through cooling limbs. Hannibal's gasps for air were dull roars, and his own answering breaths, half-bitten, half-swallowed, seemed obscenely loud. He could almost forget about the corpse of Tobias Budge lying with his guts hooked open and spread like a feast on the ground. Through the curtain of his lashes, something pushed out of the darkness for just a moment – Will held his breath and closed his eyes against it, denying it power.

"I believe we need another shower…" Hannibal whispered against his cheek.

Will chuckled, "The sheets could use a change too."

Hannibal's reply was a low throaty laugh, hot yet cool against Will's skin.

Surviving the rest of the weekend on barely four-hours sleep wasn't easy, but they managed. With his usual efficiency, Hannibal had breakfast done by the time the children drifted downstairs one by one, unaware that their parents had been missing for half the night. Irene who'd stayed the night left in a hurry as she needed to wrap up an assignment due first thing Tuesday. Stifling yawns for the rest of the morning, they went to the park, and somehow survived an entire hour of the squealing laughing and general mayhem that came paired with play-gym acrobatics and canine excitement.

He had been relieved that the children seemed to be on their best behavior, and thought nothing of the whispering between the eldest two and Hannibal. His mind still turning over the events of last night, Will hadn't caught on to what was happening, not even when he's ushered away from lunch prep – Micah put a finger to his mouth and told him that it was a super secret special lunch and *no peekies Daddy,* and dragged him away from the kitchen while Hannibal glanced over amused but utterly unhelpful. It had only dawned on him what's going on when he answered the door, Junior propped on his hip, to see the neighbor's kid loitering on the front portico with an expensive bouquet of flowers.

"Hi Mister Lecter. These are for you," Luke Richardson grinned with the charm that came with being fifteen and gangly like a bean pole.

With love from your husband, Hannibal, the card said.

They're roses – but of course they were.

American Beauty pink entangled with Leda blooms of pristine white petals dipped in blood at the edges, against the velvety red of Legacy and Opulence blooms in cool pale white. Their names leaked into his head even as he stared, at a loss, because he shouldn't know these things. Will thanked the boy and accepted the bouquet, flustered because the alpha had planned all of this in secret, had enlisted the help of the Richardson's youngest to pick up the arrangement and deliver it at the right time.

Junior's little fingers poked at each blossom curiously like they're buttons.

Will stared at the flowers in the crook of his arm as though they were bombs.

Despite having held the opera tickets in his hand and reading the clearly emblazoned date, February 13th , at least a *dozen* times, he'd still *missed the hint*. He'd missed the hint and taken his husband to see a murder.

Elizabeta shrieked with delight over the roses and insisted on carrying them for him, admiring her reflection in the mirrors and glass doors they passed until Daddy's flowers could be put in a vase, which she selected for him with the loftiness of royalty. Her joy was infectious and he smiled as she declared that she wanted flowers from Papa too, like the flowers that Daddy got. For your birthday, he promised; the little girl beamed, flashing him the gaps in her teeth.

The bouquet ended up on the dining table, directly in front of Elizabeta's place so she could admire them, casting a fragrance over the room as they sat for lunch, served to them with due ceremony by the children with Micah giggling throughout – Eli kept poking him to stop that while Tomas grumbled out of the corner of his mouth for her to leave the four-year old alone. The tinkling of the little boy's joy pierced any awkwardness that Will might have experienced at being so unprepared.

Hannibal smiled at him with unguarded affection; he tentatively smiled back.

The soup was clear and hot, the fish was served in a sauce that was delicious, exotic, and as always, *beautiful*, plated with such finesse that it was more like something from a five-star restaurant than someone's kitchen. It didn't stand out in any particular way among the meals that Hannibal liked to serve, but Will understood what it was; effort, skill, consideration, *love*. Will savored every mouthful, including the dessert – tiny raspberry meringues floating in silky creamy vanilla custard – while listening to the children chatter about the week to come, which of their friends was going to the zoo to see the new Arctic foxes and the baby penguins, which of their friends had already gone, that they should go too.

In the kitchen afterwards as they're cleaning up, he put down the dishtowel and wrapped his arms around Hannibal, kissed the bump where the alpha's neck met his spine. He didn't say anything but he didn't have to.

It's a relief when Elizabeta disappeared to play at a friend's house, Tomas barricaded himself in his bedroom to practice for the rest of the afternoon, while their youngest two settled in for naps. Like college students who had overstayed a party, they fell asleep together on the sofa.

Dinner that night seemed endless.

Will ignored Hannibal's little glances at him by keeping his eyes focused on his plate, nodding agreeably as Tomas told him about the electives he's considering for summer school; across the table, Micah gave a detailed report to his Papa about the strange cat that kept visiting them to annoy the dogs. Will struggled through bath time, yawning and filled with quiet urgency as he pretended not to notice Hannibal passing the open door of the bathroom every now and then.

At last, with everyone except Tomas settled for the night, they finally crawled into bed. They laid together in the dark for a long minute, him on his back, Hannibal on his side facing him. He rolled over and barely managed to make a sound before his mouth was caught in a long wet kiss. Hannibal whispered for permission in between kisses and he whispered back yes, shocked at the strong throb of desire that shot through him like an explosion, dousing his exhaustion as they undressed frantically in the dark.

It's not the same as last night, and exactly the same. It's too much; it's not enough. There's warmth in the touches, an overwhelming awareness of where their surfaces met, and it's so foreign that at first he froze, not sure what to do. Will knew sex as an unmated omega, where his need had felt like someone pulling him by the hair, an ache so deep and awful between his legs that he'd devolve into a sweating moaning creature. He didn't know what it was like to have sex without the need of heat to drive him. He'd gotten used to having no depth to the physical act of sex, no kindness, no sweetness.

"Let me," Hannibal whispered against his skin.

Yes.

He wanted to be pliant, to submit, aroused because his submission aroused Hannibal. This was his alpha, he reminded himself as Hannibal's hand slid from his cock to his inner thigh and then between his legs, making him shake with desire and nerves and more –

"I haven't," he began, cutting himself off when he realized abruptly that he had.

They'd laid chest to chest, skin to skin, night after night, knitting themselves together. He just didn't remember it.

He didn't remember the way that they struggled not to touch through dinner as newlyweds, each counting down the moments until they could be in bed, each wary of scaring off the other with the depth of their need. He didn't remember how he'd get into bed only to find the alpha naked, pulling him down into the sheets. He didn't remember making love when his stomach was so heavy, he couldn't do much except lie on his side and let Hannibal have him. He didn't remember hiding his face in Hannibal's chest, breathing in their sweat and arousal, his hips moving as he took the alpha into himself, again and again, until they were locked together; until his throat was dry and his thighs were wet.

Imaginary caresses from a thousand nights over a dozen years washed over him, making him hot and cold. Hannibal held his face steady with both hands as he leaned in to kiss him, calming his anxiety.

They made love like betas did, face to face, every sensation amplified by their need to be quiet. Hannibal sucked him off and caressed him until his slick wet the sheets, and then entered him swiftly, not giving him a moment to doubt, trapping his gasp of surprise with his tongue and swallowing his cries with his mouth. The dull stretch ached distantly until it ebbed into pleasure, transforming into a mad throbbing that had him lifting his hips up for more like a wanton.

The room disappeared as Hannibal rocked above him, face locked in intense concentration as he drew out the pleasure, drowning out the world. In the bracket of the alpha's arms, he felt fragile, delicate, like he was melting, arrested by the image of himself reflected in Hannibal's blown-pupils; omega and *his* – his cherished mate, his beloved companion, his beautiful prize.

It's intoxicating, being the focus of Hannibal's attention. Will threw his head back and dug his hands into the alpha's hips, twisting and writhing as he felt a slow explosion of sensation crush the air from his lungs, blinding and deafening in scale. At the back of his mind, he heard the beta girls who allowed him to sit with them at lunch giggling, telling him with the worldliness of fourteen-year olds that he was lucky – that orgasm started with an 'O' for a reason.

When he came back to his senses, Hannibal was panting against his shoulder, knot already softening. His husband studied his face, expression indescribably soft and kissed him languidly, drowsy from orgasm – then joked he could go again, give him an hour. Will broke into a breathless chuckle and shoved the alpha off him, but part of him shivered in want.

The alpha tugged and tucked and rolled them until he's lying in the man's arms, wrapped up together. Will sleepily noted the man's generous smattering of chest hair, silver with age, damp with sweat, how they bristled and brushed against his slack hand, his throat; tried to imagine Hannibal with a beard, with white-hair; thought about growing a beard himself, once his heat-cycles ran their course and his hormones settled down; tried to imagine them growing old together as his eyes fluttered to half-mast and slid ever closer to slumber.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was supposed to be much longer, but a friend pointed out that the next scene that followed was completely different in tone and I should move the rest onto the next chapter. So you probably will get another chapter soon-ish - I hope?
Basically I came out of hospital about a week ago and so if I sounded different, or the quality of my writing seems inconsistent, you know why.
I felt removing the other parts made this chapter seem kinda just fluff (no I totally consider a murder scene fluff) - BUT IT'S ABOUT VALENTINE'S DAY, and you know

that Hannibal would totally do this, the murder tableau, all the bathing and cuddling and the sex and the lunch.

I keep promising to get around to talking about Will's development as a killer and the courtship in New Orleans, but rushing there always seems so unnatural. Some days I look over all my summaries of the things to come and want to bang my head for being overly audacious. It's next up, I swear, it's queued and has been queued since like part 7

針の穴から天を覗く

Chapter Summary

Will wants to remember. And he wants to remember now.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a Japanese proverb meaning 'to peak at heaven through the eye of a needle'
I.e. to not have the full picture

There are some attitudes expressed by some side characters in this chapter which are repugnant to me; there's implied sexual violence, implied abuse too. It's very brief lines about OCs.
For visuals, Hannibal's suite is based on the King suite at the Soniat Hotel. Google it for photos :) I made it that his apartment came with a kitchenette and dinning area too, not just the sitting room. For the detail oriented, Will's NOLA address in this AU aka Laurie House, is 837 Royal St
Unbetad.
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 13 January 2003

“Thank you for seeing me.”

Bedelia Du Maurier took a seat at her dining table and smiled politely at her most unusual patient. Technically their appointment was this Thursday, but she was only mildly surprised by the man’s appearance at her door – bearing gifts no less – on her regular weekday off, set aside for paperwork. Will Graham had left on Saturday.

“You seemed like you needed to talk,” and she would be lying if she claimed to not be curious about what had occurred in the three weeks that Mister Graham had been in Baltimore.

“Yes, nevertheless, it was rude to show up unannounced,” Hannibal Lecter placed the plate in front of her. “*Tête de Veau en Sauce Verte*.”

Bedelia peered at the portions of well-seasoned meat, the swirls of its layers surrounded by a wreath of herbs, pickles and a quail egg halved and set among the foliage, offset by a single *pommes parisienne* dashed in burgundy sauce, and a log of marrow bone sticking out of the plate like the handle of a knife. She refrained from the desire to tell the man that she didn't partake in protein after 7PM.

"Smells like a bonfire. Your handiwork, I presume?"

The alpha smiled magnanimously as he served himself, "Veal smoked on a pyre of dry hay. Imparts a unique smoldering flavour to the meat that lingers in the mouth. I hope it will be to your taste – I apologise for not asking ahead but I wanted dinner to be a surprise."

"I'm sure it will be delicious."

"I certainly hope so," Hannibal sat and shot her a teasing look, "since you've refused invitations to my dinner table, this will be your first experience of my cooking."

She smiled, polite, "I have it on hearsay that I will be more than impressed."

The alpha gave her a pleased smile, satisfied with the compliment and puffed with the knowledge that his culinary prowess had developed its own reputation. He began to eat only after he eagerly watched her take her first bite, his smile widening at her low hum of appreciation. Turning to his own food, Hannibal took a delicate opening bite, pausing to have a small sip of wine. Du Maurier watched as his eyes fluttered to half-mast as he savored the delicate aromas combined, his expression almost erotic in its total immersion in the pleasure of consuming his own gastronomy.

"So," she swallowed, the smoky tang of the veal curling in the back of her throat, "what's on your mind, Hannibal?"

"Before Will left, I asked him to be my mate," Hannibal told her, with the conversational ease of a friend confiding in another regarding the trifles of everyday life, "He said that he enjoyed my company, but he's not ready for marriage."

Bedelia Du Maurier froze for a second, her wine glass just barely touching her lips. She tipped her glass and swallowed a measured mouthful, letting it glide across her tongue and fill her senses as it disappeared down her throat. She licked her lips afterwards.

"I see."

Hannibal pierced the sphere of potato on his plate and held it before him in contemplation, staked upon his fork, "I'm disappointed, but I also respect his decision."

The *pommes parisienne* disappeared into the man's mouth.

Looking across the table, she studied the genial expression that the alpha wore, trying to find signs of discontent. His acceptance of the situation appeared genuine, even under close scrutiny. He was undeterred by the rejection, his stubbornness to have this omega whom he had grown so inexplicably fond of as fervent as it ever was. A minor setback, the refusal of

Will Graham to see how they obviously belonged together, for someone as tenacious as Hannibal Lecter.

The man's eyes flicked to her plate, "Your veal is getting cold."

With reluctance, she dragged her knife across the meat and took a desultory bite. It was very good, she had to admit, but too heavy for her palate.

"He wants to be sure of his choice, and so do I," he continued, slicing another piece of veal before carefully collecting some parsley and lemon, "After all, if we mated, I would be father to his children, and he would be utterly dependent on me during his confinement."

"Trust is a necessary component of any relationship, but it's importance is especially elevated in the omega psyche due to their unique vulnerabilities."

"It's only been a day, but I miss him." Hannibal shook his head, the gesture so small that she would have easily missed it if she wasn't watching him so carefully, as if he were confounded by his own admission. His expression was a rare study in longing. "I had looked forwards to his visit but I underestimated how much I would enjoy having him here."

Of course he did. Three weeks sleeping under the same roof with an unchaperoned omega? She would be surprised if he hadn't slithered into Will Graham's bed within a week, and stayed there. Yet she found that she couldn't quite heap the blame at his feet. After all, he was only doing what evolution had equipped him to do. She hoped for the young omega's sake that he had update his birth control – not that it would be effective, if the alpha had been particularly inspired.

"Was there a reason behind your sudden proposal?"

The alpha met her gaze, suddenly serious, "Are you asking as my colleague or my friend?"

"I'm asking you as an alpha, to another alpha," she said, voice firm and giving the man no room for interpretation.

He inspected her with the cold-calculation of a reptile, making her skin tighten with unease. Whatever he saw, he evidently felt bemused by it; the corner of Hannibal Lecter's mouth tugged up in the slightest of smiles. He inhaled audibly, tone wistful; "Though I knew I would one day have children, I never thought about it beyond that. After meeting Will, I understood the appeal – that there could be a physical embodiment of our connection, irrefutable evidence in the eyes of everyone that he was mine, and I was his."

Bedelia Du Maurier smiled thinly. His reply, however oblique, was as good as a confession.

The alpha held her gaze before glancing away lazily, a clear dismissal. He took a sip of his wine, resuming his meal, as though he hadn't just acknowledged that he had manipulated Will Graham into unprotected sexual intercourse in hopes of staking a claim upon the omega through a child.

"Tell me, Doctor Du Maurier, how do you see me?"

“Are you asking me as a colleague or a patient?”

“Both,” Hannibal’s mouth quirked, “and as a fellow alpha.”

For a minute, there was the soft acoustics of their knives and forks on the fine china plates, the crystalline echo of wine being poured, and the young alpha, waiting patiently for her answer as he chewed methodically, their gazes locked in a battle of wills. She broke first, her gaze flicking down to her plate.

“Controversial dish, veal,” she murmured.

The Present

At the sound of footsteps, Will opened his eyes to a familiar pair of knee-high boots, and slowly, almost reluctantly, raised his gaze to meet Alana Bloom’s benevolent smile. It’s almost too cold to be standing on the roof of the Forensics building, with the clouds looming oppressively as snow dust bulged from within their confines and cast a dull greyness over everything, but it helped clear his head.

“Hi,” she said, hunching in her coat, hands in her pockets.

“Hello,” he said cautiously, because they had already said their greetings at the lab, standing over the corpse of Tobias Budge and his tray of entrails; she hadn’t been pleased to see him but they had kept it professional. He didn’t know why she followed him out here – no, actually, that wasn’t true. He did know. It’s none of her business though – *it’s not your choice*.

“I didn’t expect to see you here today.”

He hadn’t expected to be here today either, but the idea of getting access to the complete Ripper file under FBI-approval had been too tempting to resist. So he had left while the children were still distracted by breakfast, having already said his goodbyes to Hannibal privately upstairs.

Will looked away, his eyes tracking a group of trainees in gym clothes doing a circuit jog of the grounds. He watched the ponytail of the shortest runner, a young girl who didn’t look past twenty-five with her heart-shaped face and ruddy cheeks, whip from side to side, like an out of control pendulum.

“Surprise,” he muttered under his breath, sarcasm tinging the edges of his voice.

The beta looked away with a smile, mildly exasperated yet not at all surprised at the response. That furrow between her brows never quite went away. She came to a stop next to him with a sigh, her intent obvious. She didn't want him to deny what had happened, and didn't think it was healthy for him to be here, doing the thing that had led to what she saw as unacceptable damage to his psyche, his personhood; his pretence at normalcy would only hurt him in the long run; think about Hannibal, think about the children.

He was thinking about them. Constantly.

"How was your weekend?" She finally asked.

Will answered despite himself, "I think I picked up a cold. I didn't hear you come up."

Alana smiled slowly, studying him. "You look fine. And you didn't shut the door."

"Yeah well I don't feel fine," he exhaled noisily, "We weren't exactly dressed to head out to Kent County that night."

"I heard."

He turned to face her, "Why weren't you there?"

"I was out of town for a week," She admitted, and then at his arched eyebrow, she added, "Symposium, I was filling in for someone – he has bronchitis."

Will went back to staring out at the car park. "Well you missed the fun."

"Apparently so," she replied, her smile gradually widening, "How was the *rest* of the weekend?"

He knew he was being difficult, "Fine."

"Must have been a very good *fine*," She chuckled, sly. "You've got a day spa glow."

Will shot her a pointedly wry look and didn't rise to the bait. He wasn't as startled by her question as he would have been this morning; the effect had kind been lost now after his ambush by Beverly Katz as soon as he entered the labs. It seemed Hannibal's penchant for embarrassing him with public displays of affection were well-known. Will felt a ghost of a touch over his neck, the sense-memory of his husband drinking in his scent.

"Have you ever helped anyone recover memories?"

Alana Bloom's face furrowed in a complicated expression before she joined him in staring out into the parking lot. "Sometimes, mostly for victims of traumatic assaults."

"How would you do it?"

It took her a moment to answer, almost as if she had to control herself. When she spoke, her voice was low, tempered with lingering recriminations. "I would start with a cognitive

interview. If the memories are too deeply suppressed or perhaps out of reach due to chemical or neurological trauma, I would consider guided hypnosis."

Will nodded, taking in the information.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, "Are you considering it?"

Was he?

"When you began consulting, I made you a promise," the alpha told him, solemn despite his deliberately light tone of voice, "to make sure that your work didn't affect our family, that I'd look after you, and in return, you would always return to us. I'm not sure I've done a good job."

They were naked in bed, because they couldn't seem to stop touching each other. Or rather, Will couldn't, high on the addition of physical intimacy to everything else that was going on. He could never seem to make it past turning out the lights before reaching across the bed for Hannibal, and having his desire answered, as if the alpha could tell how his entire body was infused with need. And it seemed that he could never resist asking probing questions about his forgotten past afterwards, warm and sated.

"You've done enough."

"I was supposed to have known, I was supposed to have seen something was wrong."

Will raised his head from where he had been resting it, pressed up against the cage protecting Hannibal's heart, the sound of it still beating in his ears as he rolled over onto an elbow. The alpha turned his head to look at him from where he'd been staring off into the ceiling. Hannibal's mouth quirked as he leaned in.

When they pull apart, they're breathless but too tired to do more than hold each other.

Will hunched his shoulders as a gust of wind blew past them, "And if I was?"

The look at she gave him was solemn, "I would ask you what you hope to get out of it. Because if you have unrealistic expectations heading into the session, Will, you're going to end up disappointed."

Will couldn't help breaking out in a sardonic chuckle, "So if I pretended to be skeptical about it, you'd help me."

It's to Alana Bloom's credit that her entire countenance shifted and her mouth twitched, her wide-eyed earnestness balanced out by her keen sense of irony.

"I'm free on Thursday afternoon," she offered, "if you want to come by my office."

Will took a deep breath and forced himself to relax, before opening his eyes to the pulses of light that radiated outwards from the small device sitting on the table between them. He was dimly aware of the beta's strained expression, her eyes wide-open as if staring at him would make it all fine, her body paralyzed by the slow steady poison of fear. The steady taps of the metronome were as loud as gunshots for the way it rang through the utter silence of the private office at Georgetown.

He had left the house this afternoon after Junior had settled down for a nap. He knew that the little boy would be upset when he woke, off-balance that his Daddy was missing, but that he would be quickly distracted by Marie taking him out to pick up Micah from preschool. Hannibal hadn't queried him over his prediction that he'd be late home this evening, but Will knew that he knew. He'd never extracted a promise from Alana to keep his secrets, so she was free to tell anyone she wanted yet she was too circumspect to tell anyone except Hannibal; his husband had looked slightly terse around the eyes this morning when they'd kissed goodbye.

Despite her chalky complexion, when Alana finally spoke, her voice was soft, rich in compassion, and her words slow. "Close your eyes."

Disorientated from his stare into the pulsing light, his eyes fluttered shut gladly.

Shadows rose and fell through the delicate skin of his eyelids. Back and forth the metronome clicked in his mind's eye.

PWUM. PWUM. PWUM. PWUM.

"Feel the heaviness in your limbs…"

Through his shuttered eyes, Will caught the beat of the light, the clap of the dark. He saw Alana, her concerned expression, the slightly stunned cast to her wide-flung eyes, ringed in dark lashes that glimmered like they're misted in salt. She disappeared in a flare of light, swept away by the swing of the metronome, until she was only mist herself, a glossy gossamer thing, wavering in between the pulses of his heart.

"Imagine yourself in a safe and relaxing place…" Alana's ghost whispered, her voice whistling through his hair and circling the shell of his ear like liquid circling down a sinkhole.

Will took a deep breath and felt himself grow heavy, warm, imagining himself back home in the study, in his chair, facing Hannibal.

"Safe and secure… Safe, to relax completely…"

In his mind, he saw her, something airy and insubstantial rising to her feet, the table disappearing, the room melting away until it's just her. And then it wasn't Alana at all, but

some flickering, shimmering being, translucent and beautiful.

“No matter how deeply you go…” The water sprite told him, the very edges of her disintegrating as she leaned across the table with her hands outstretched. Will reached out for her, her touch cool like a breeze; “My voice,” she declared, so close that he could taste her, “will go with you.”

He was falling. He was falling backwards, the chair he was sitting on crumbling like dust, the floor giving under the weight of his body and then he wasn’t.

What do you smell?

A lush dampness…

Will Graham’s eyes snapped open at the sensation of cool water lapping at his toes, the sensation shocking him out of his stupor. He was standing barefoot in nothing but a t-shirt and his sleeping shorts. Clear water, crystalline in clarity, sloshed over his ankles, pushed by some unknown current. There was no sky here, just stone glittering with veins of crystal and limestone, an enormous cathedral of rock, carved by water and decorated by salt. Light shone from above through a funnel of ever sharper rock, but when he lifted a hand to cover his eyes, to squint up and see, he couldn’t see anything, just light.

What do you feel?

There was a breeze on his skin.

Will took a step forward, felt the water rise. He took another step. Water wet his calves, caressing them with gentle soothing coolness.

What do you see?

He stared down as his feet, so clear in the water. He took another step and another, until he was waist deep. A black inky shadow drifted towards him. Like he was drawn by an inaudible siren, Will wadded out into the deep, drawing ever closer to the darkness. Soon, even as he stood in the same place, the water rose up to meet him. Closing his eyes, he took a breath as he surrendered, allowing the inky darkness to engulf him.

It was dark here under the water, quiet, only the bubbles of his exhales disturbing the stillness. He felt like he could stay there forever.

Open your eyes.

Will opened his eyes. There’s light coming towards him, flicking here and there, piercing the water like a knife, like it was searching. Will closed his eyes.

Open your eyes.

Sunlight pierced Will Graham’s eyes. For a moment he was disorientated, but then his eyes adjusted and he blinked wetly at the sight in front of him. He was standing at the welcome plaque of a restaurant, and Hannibal was speaking to the head waitress. He felt his breath

catch when the alpha turned back to smile at him. Hannibal was young – Will caught his own reflection in a panel of glass – and so was he, his hair drifting in tangles past his jaw line, his skin flush with pink.

With the quality of a dream, he allowed his hand to be taken, for him to be escorted upstairs and out onto the balcony to be seated.

The alpha pulled out his seat for him at the same time as he reached for it. Will pulled his hand back as if burnt. Hannibal smiled at him when he glanced up, awkward.

Allow me, the alpha said.

Will forced himself not to flinch or freeze when he sensed the man lean in slightly to scent him as he sat.

What do you see?

Hannibal smiled at him from across the table, his face odd with all his edges sharpened by youth. Will awkwardly tried to smile back; he wasn't very successful, but his date wasn't put off by it. The alpha ordered for them, a full meal with appetizers, drinks, mains and dessert, in defiance of Will's insistence that if Hannibal wanted to have lunch, they could catch a bite away from the tourists besieging Jackson Square. But I am a tourist, Hannibal had replied with that charming quirk of his mouth, indulge me, Will. The memory tumbled around the omega's head like a handful of marbles, clicking and clacking across the surface of his mind.

It was their first proper date.

"Tell me about your family," Hannibal smiled warmly, something teasing in his brown gaze, "Am I going to have to contend with a suspicious mother interrogating me on my intentions?"

Will took a breath, his gaze resting upon the artists set up along the pedestrian strip in front of the cathedral. One of them was half-asleep in her folding chair, one of her sandals kicked off and being pecked at by a particularly prodigious pigeon, "I doubt she'd care. Never knew her."

This was usually the point when his date would stammer apologies and try to carry on with the conversation only to flounder hopelessly. Should she/he ask about what happened? Was Mrs. Graham dead? Did she pass with his birth? Had she been run over? What if she had gotten cancer? What if she had been murdered? Was that why the omega had insisted on becoming a police officer? The possibilities, each more bleak than the next, would run through their minds like rats and they would end up frozen, paralyzed by politeness.

Hannibal Lecter glanced up from his appetiser of jumbo shrimp, his expression displaying no such reservations. Death was a part of life, was his attitude, nothing to shy away from.

"Tell me about your mother."

He thought the alpha would demure, because how could he be anything but suitable? No need to question his background; he was an alpha; he was rich and educated, and he was European, even titled, moneyed in a way that Will couldn't even grasp; there were three omegas at Laurie House right now who would leap at the chance to be here, being wined and dined by the likes of Hannibal Lecter. Will wasn't one of them, but he wanted to be, he wanted to like this man.

"Quid pro quo, then?"

He nodded faintly.

A slow smile stretch across the alpha's face. "I'll start."

Both of Hannibal Lecter's parents and his infant sister died when the alpha was just a child. He had been an orphan in Soviet Lithuania until he had been reclaimed by his uncle, Robertas, as a young man of fourteen and thrust instantly into the cauldron that was France in the eighties. Despite his downcast eyes, Will listened to the tale closely as they moved past appetisers and onto the next course.

He knew that the man wasn't looking for sympathy, his tone nothing but matter-of-fact, at times almost poignant and yet never sad or bitter; nevertheless, Will felt something stir within him as he imagined the cold white harshness of the interminable Baltic winters, the meagreness of everything, the convulsing and groaning of twelve-year old Hannibal Lecter's little stomach, crying out in the night for more as he lay there in the darkness, surrounded by snores and snuffles, alone in a sea of bodies, his limbs sore from labouring and hungry to the bone.

Will ate the fish on his plate, the taste exploding on his tastebuds as his mind entwined with borrowed remembrances of the teen sitting in the kitchen of his uncle's Paris apartment, freshly scrubbed in clothes so comfortable he swore they were clouds, fingers stained with soft fragrant butter, parting his lips to accept his first mouthful of French bread, so fresh it was still steaming slightly.

The alpha didn't need to tell him that he loved his parents, his sister, his uncle and even his aunt-in-law and the aunt's adopted daughter. Will could hear it in the cadence of his voice, the way he gave the barest of details about those long years of bleak lonely waiting, with no hope that his uncle would be able to break through Soviet bureaucracy and rescue him, but paid almost lavish attention to describing the wonders of his family's lands, his gratitude to Uncle Robertas and his wife for devoting years of their life to finding him, to give him back who he was – Hannibal Lecter the eighth, son of Hannibal Lecter the seventh and his beloved wife, Simonetta, of the Visconti-Sforza clan of Milan and Florence.

Will cleared this throat, grown thick with second-hand sorrow and joy. "Where is he now, your uncle?"

"He passed when I was seventeen, unfortunately, and I was orphaned once more." A tender smile of remembrance played over the alpha's mouth as he focused on his plate, knife and fork clacking as he sliced off a piece of veal, "We have that in common, you and I; we're both orphans."

“My father’s still alive,” Will corrected, taking another bite of food.

The alpha studied him, brown eyes searching out his sharp corners. “You mention that as an after fact.”

He exhaled, irritated enough to need a sip of wine. “I thought we agreed; no psychoanalyzing.”

Hannibal glanced down, unrepentant in his gentle amusement, “I’m sorry, Will; observing is what I do. I can’t turn it off anymore than you can.”

Will didn’t know what kind of face he made but instead of being insulted, the alpha grinned.

“What does your father do? I assume he’s still works.”

“He’s a mechanic,” he replied with a put-upon breath, and then admitted with reluctant honesty, “We were poor. I followed my father as he picked up work around the boat yards in Biloxi and Greenville to the lake boats on Erie.”

The alpha chewed his food slowly and looked thoughtful but didn’t ask the obvious question that lay between them: if his parents were both beta, or if his mother had been an irresponsible alpha female.

“That’s a lot of moving around,” Hannibal mused.

Will glanced at the alpha and couldn’t quite keep the frown that flicked across his face. There was something about this alpha. He couldn’t put his fingers on it…

“You were always the new boy at school,” the alpha noted, cutting neatly into the last bites of his veal, “Always the stranger.”

The truth hit harder than it should.

“You had it worse I’m sure,” Will muttered, “You went from a Soviet backwater to Paris.”

It was only after he said it that he realized it could be taken as an insult, in several ways, and that the alpha didn’t deserve it. When he glanced up though, the alpha was calmly eating his meal, his expression of gentle amusement not wavering for a second.

“Yes,” Hannibal admitted, fond with nostalgia, “It took awhile to get used to things.”

Will looked into the alpha’s eyes and saw the stubborn strength of a boy used to being despised (*classist pig, capitalist scum, alpha bastard*) and the quiet resolve of a teen who was unashamed of his inability to connect to his peers in eighties Paris. He hadn’t cared for punk rock or dance clubs or Michael Jackson; he’d preferred the company of his uncle and aunt, spent his free time in the public libraries (*Hannibal loved to walk among the shelves running his fingers along the spines – he could read anything, all of it was there for him*), wandered the hallways of the Louvre on weekends, and loved to sit in the benches of the Luxembourg Gardens making sketches of the lounging sunbathers and students and workers on their lunch breaks, chatting as they ate. Hannibal Lecter knew who he was and was comfortable with it

in a way most people struggled with, and he appreciated everything the world had to offer with the perspective of someone who could see the true value of a thing, even when it was grotesque or sad.

The conversation moved onto the alpha's desire to cook for him.

"I don't think Miss Delia will let you into the kitchen."

"Then I'll just have to be creative."

Will felt his mouth tug up in a smile between mouthfuls of cake. Despite himself, he had to admit that there was something charming about an alpha who got excited about the prospect of slaving away on a stove to impress him.

What do you see?

Some piano piece was playing on the apartment's sound system. It was Chopin.

"How did you come to work in Homicide?"

The alpha caught his eye as they sat down to a meal in the sumptuous surroundings of Hannibal's small suite on the second floor of a historic guesthouse. It was on the corner of Chartres and Governor Nicholls, less than three blocks from him, and had been set aside for the alpha's disposal whenever he was in town to visit Will. He didn't want to think about the expense – a place like this went for, what? Four-hundred or more a night? Sometimes, Will wondered what he had gotten himself into, agreeing to date the alpha.

The older man had made *Soupe à L'oignon* for appetizers and later, they would have *Blanquette de Veau*.

"It's not common to find omegas who rise to the rank of detective in the police force, and even rarer, to grant that position to someone unmated. Miss Delia told me that you're well-known in the area, and that you're part of the local history."

Will chuckled darkly. "Not really."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"It was a couple of years ago – it's nothing."

The alpha stared at him over their soup, obviously not sold that it was truly nothing.

"This is delicious," he said, trying to change the topic.

"Thank you," Hannibal smiled, genuinely pleased by the compliment but determined not to be distracted, "You say it's nothing but it sounds to me like there's a story."

Will ate another mouthful of the soup, savoring it's thickness, the way the taste infused his mouth. He tried to remember himself, young and just finished with college at twenty-one, heading into the academy, graduating top of the class despite his dynamic being against him.

“I wanted Homicide, that was always the goal,” he began haltingly, as though this was a confession. “When I graduated, I was sent to the French Quarter. I was happy about it, but pretty surprised.”

“You have a keen mind, Will,” Hannibal remarked, “I’m sure it was noted.”

He smiled sardonically, and ate another mouthful. “Maybe. Or maybe I just got lucky, and they saw I was an omega and decided it was good PR. Either way, I ended up here.”

He glanced up to see if the alpha was still interested or if he could change the subject now, but Hannibal just stared back at him, politely sipping at his glass of Beaujolais red.

Will took a drink himself, needing it.

“I was only working for a few weeks when a couple got mugged just off Bourbon.”

Hannibal’s smile widened, obviously thinking of the way they had met.

“They were tourists, Canadian. The perpetrator was an addict, he was high and it got violent."

Someone heard the screaming and called 911. Will still remembered the sight of the woman, a fifty-three year old beta school teacher from Ontario with two adult children, sobbing in agony as her husband’s body was outlined in chalk, before they muffled her with an oxygen mask and shut the ambulance doors, whisking her away to the hospital.

Why, she had been thinking, *why was this happening, this was our first vacation without the kids in forever, twenty-five years, I love you Mark.*

Will blinked it away, hiding his slight tremor. “Anyway, Detective Roarke got the case; he was a senior detective in my district. I was called in to canvass the area where it happened, see if anyone else saw or heard anything since the suspect was out of it and the victim was in surgery…” He paused and took a deep breath, eating more of the delicious soup before continuing, “It was supposed to be a minor case, open and shut.”

Hannibal tilted his head, “Something happened.”

Everything had happened.

“I was responsible for talking to the guy who lived on the second floor, my partner at the time did downstairs.”

And that, as they say, was history.

“The beta male resident I questioned seemed normal at first, but I noticed that I couldn’t hear the jazz being played by the cafe nearby. He’d soundproofed the place, which was odd – and there were other things off, just little things,” Will paused, struck because he’d never told anyone the story, not anyone unrelated to the police force anyway. He’d given his oral report to Detective Roarke on the scene, dazed from a tranquilizer the paramedics had sprung on him as a precaution and hurting badly from the stab, and again later to the commander. Then after two weeks off to recover, physically and mentally, he repeated the same tale to the

multiple shrinks brought in to make sure he was okay. Everyone wanted to know how he'd known – *how* could he have possibly have known?

Personality disorders and neuroses, whose unique combination and manifestation within his person made him a skilled 'natural' profiler, they finally concluded, if there was such a thing as 'natural' profilers. Yes, while the omega dynamic had more mirror neurons than alphas or beta, Will Graham was an exceptional case.

"He was avoidant when he spoke and I thought he looked at me strangely, plus he kept trying to herd me out. There was a door to a second bedroom with three-locks on it from the outside of it. He was subtle about it, but I noticed anyway."

"Omegas are the most sensitive of all the dynamics, it's what makes them such good researchers and teachers – you notice the details," Hannibal took a sip of his wine, "It's considered an extension of the nurturing instinct."

Will ignored that, eyes fixed to the side, remembering how the room had smelt – bleach, lots and lots of bleach – and the black-out curtains, freshly laundered (who regularly washes their curtains). "One minute I was telling him not to touch me, threatening to arrest him if he didn't open the second bedroom door now – next he punched me in the face."

A decrepit laugh came out of him, a soulless depressing noise. "I got stabbed in the shoulder – he was trying to stop me from shooting him," he drew in a deep breath, "But I ended up kneeing him in the groin. When he was down I bashed him over the head with a kettle."

Not his most charming moment, but comical in hindsight – even now, Will fantasized that if he ever mated, when he became frustrated with his alpha, that's what he'd do; one good hit over the head with a kettle.

Hannibal's face was a study in concentration and deep concern, his brows furrowed.

"I was fine," he reassured the alpha, "I immediately called my partner and dispatch; I mean, it ended up being a circus but the paramedics got me settled."

"What happened to your suspect?"

Will stared off the side and fumbled for the glass of wine, "It turned out that he was the Bourbon Street Strangler."

Hannibal paused at the moniker before bringing his wine glass to his mouth, scenting it before taking a small measured sip. Will drained his glass, despite it being half full; if Hannibal thought it was a waste of good wine, he didn't say anything and his expression didn't change – attentive, tense and compassionate.

He took a breath, "He kept his latest victim in the second bedroom to…spend time with her, before he killed her. He'd kept all of them there, over the years."

A week of being tied up in the dark; gradually realizing that one had to at least pretend to cooperate when the tiger was in the room; trying the doorknob and banging on the windows

but never being heard over the sound of jazz and big band banging out across the road; crying at night, wanting mommy to hold her, for her papa to rescue her. Eventually, they would stop crying but they'd never stop being afraid. They learned as all regularly traumatized do to play nice with the bad man – it was better than being tossed away in a trash bag on Bourbon Street.

"He worked for the paper; wrote obituaries and human interest stories."

The irony.

For a moment, there was just the sound of them finishing their soups. Hannibal watched him avidly, his brows furrowed. A minute later, the alpha excused himself and disappeared around the corner into the kitchenette to bring out the *Blanquette de Veau.* Will took the opportunity to quickly run his hands over his face, wiping away the moisture that had collected in the corner of his eyes.

"What ended up happening?" The alpha asked as soon as their wine glasses had been replaced with fresh ones, filled with Bordeaux red – the Beaujolais was far too light for veal, Hannibal advised him.

A happy ending, Will supposed.

"He was sentenced to death by lethal injection; died last year, prison brawl. I was reassigned to be Roarke's aide when I came back from my mandated time off. The survivor started high school this year – she sent me a postcard."

Hannibal smiled slowly, with just the right amount of relief and pleasure to make Will believe that he cared and was relieved all had ended well, that he understood why Will didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to name names. The omega tentatively smiled back and picked up his fork.

"Quid quo pro," he prompted, wishing to change the subject, shift the mood.

The alpha's mouth twitched and he glanced down, eating a bite as he mulled over what tale he should share.

"When I was a small boy, I used to go hunting with my father – fowls mostly, but sometimes, we would stalk deer. I was more a mascot than anything else…"

Open your eyes.

There's music on the breeze and evening had fallen hard with the autumn change. For their tenth date, they had walked around, supposedly to tour the Quarter as Hannibal was still fairly new to everything, but really because Will just didn't feel like talking. They had stopped for some time to listen to a jazz band on the street, young students in hoodies and cargo shorts, playing their hearts out. The alpha had smiled appreciatively and clapped at the end of the performance, leaving a twenty-dollar tip for the young buskers as they wandered on.

Will rarely walked around his neighborhood for leisure, usually too preoccupied with being on the look-out for trouble or rushing to pick up some miscellaneous groceries before the store shut on him. It looked different that evening, viewing it with someone whose eyes were still unused to the hanging ferns, the brazen artworks, the mishmash of French and Spanish. Hannibal had something interesting to say about everything, and in response, he found himself pointing out the details, telling the stories that he had heard from Miss Delia and some of the colorful citizens he'd come across in his patrols, where was a good place to get beignets on the fly, and to avoid the Chinese food from that place on the corner.

New previously hidden parts of the Quarter were unveiled to him as he followed Hannibal into places he'd previously walked past hundreds of times and yet never once wondered about. Art galleries, antique shops, boutiques selling hideously expensive designer French cookware, and little wine rooms serving cheese plates and tapas set up above florists, with nothing to indicate they existed at all except a little polished plaque in Spanish.

It only took an hour or so of wandering before he gave into holding onto the man's arm as Hannibal kept offering, letting the alpha manoeuvre them through the ever-thickening crowds as dusk fell. People's eyes were drawn to the well-dressed alpha, almost statuesque in his perfectly turned-out crisp dress-casuals. Will became an accessory, receiving cursory glances and indulgent smiles as he was paid attention only because he was the object of an alpha's affection – and therefore his money. He was glad for it, since he was never comfortable with the way that people would look at him upon catching a whiff of his scent, the assumptions they'd make. If he was in uniform, he'd be left alone, but when he wasn't, well…

"I infiltrated the socialist's club at the humanities campus where I was taking my electives, out of curiosity than anything else," the alpha confided him, amused by the painting someone had done of Marx in pop-art colors, "I badly miscalculated their enthusiasm, unfortunately, and wound up holding onto their banner, wearing a beret in the protest march – I ended up ducking into a side alley and sneaking away. Uncle Robertas was horrified, of course, when I got home with the paraphernalia."

Will listened, increasingly incredulous as he was instructed on making effective barricades, human or otherwise, to hold back the riot control police.

"The French don't throw rocks – there's a method to it," the alpha told him with grave seriousness betrayed only by the twinkle in his eyes. "We spent all afternoon painting them – flowers mostly – I believe they were trying to be ironic."

Will chuckled, genuinely caught up in the good-humor of Hannibal's tales of youthful folly; how he had wanted to be a baker for all of a day, before tasting his first *éclair* and hereafter decided he was going to be a patisserie chef, before changing his mind the day after upon trying *Magret de Canard*. He changed his mind again of course, as young men do, once he started school and realized that his single-minded relentless ability to focus at the detriment of everything else around him was a credit in the sciences; specifically it was a wonderful ability to have in medicine, seen as a positive rather than a negative.

"I ended up becoming a surgeon."

“Why did you stop being a surgeon?” Will asked, because even without questioning the man, he knew that the alpha had been good at what he’d done prior to switching to psychiatry. It wasn’t for the money, and certainly not for fame.

“I killed someone,” Hannibal murmured, the answer surprising Will enough that he turned to look at the man. “More accurately, I couldn’t save someone. It felt like killing them.”

“You worked in emergency, had to happen from time to time.”

The alpha shrugged, his eyes drawn to a series of artworks stacked under the windows of a cafe, “It happened too many times. What about you?”

Will met the man’s gaze before turning back to taking in the sights and smells of their meandering stroll; somewhere down the street, someone was cooking – it smelt of spices onions and seafood. “What do you mean?”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

The twenty-five year old thought of the blackout he’d had two weeks ago, how he’d come back to himself, dressed in overalls and a baseball cap, his fishing harpoon cradled loosely in the crook of his elbow – there had been blood and he’d panicked, overwhelmed by his first time. He had called the alpha immediately, a knee-jerk response that he came to regret when he realized it was only 5AM, but Hannibal had offered to meet him for early morning breakfast. He got over it, and though he wouldn’t admit it, having an alpha around helped.

“No fatalities on the job,” he murmured, then with a smile that sat oddly on his face, added, “I’ve got a problem with pulling the trigger.”

What do you see, Will? Will?

There was music coming from further down Royal, which was closed to anything except foot traffic as entire troupes of musicians sat on crates and foldable stools along three blocks, surrounded by throngs of people, mostly older men and women, dancing together. Will could hear it the closer they got to his place. At the curiosity on Hannibal’s face, he gave in and allowed the alpha to lead him on past his door and to the next block where the crowds were.

“This reminds me of a place in Lithuania,” the alpha said into his ear, close enough that he didn’t have to raise his voice. “I visited once, in the mid-nineties. They would hold dances like these on the Sunday in the town square, and people from the surrounding counties would attend to meet with strangers and dance together; I was told a few romances had began there, and some infamous friendships. Do you want to dance?”

Will shook his head with an embarrassed smile, “Ah no, I’m not a dancer.”

“Do you mind if I…?”

“Be my guest,” he chuckled.

With a jaunty smile, the alpha left and went to one of the elderly ladies standing on the sidelines, shuffling on her own with an expression of longing to join the others on the

impromptu dance floor. Holding out a hand, Hannibal smiled charmingly and presumably introduced himself, before turning and gesturing to Will.

Whatever he said, it produced a laugh and a delighted nod from the matron, who took up Hannibal's outstretched hand and led the young alpha into the dancing throng. Will crossed his arms and watched them dancing together with an indulgent smile, grudgingly impressed that the alpha, dressed always in his fine, fine clothes, could be utterly at ease amidst the colorful polyester dresses, worn polo shirts and baggy cargo shorts. It confirmed Will's suspicions that Hannibal's tastes really were that refined, and that while he would never be ashamed of his wealth, he didn't considered it evidence of superiority, intelligence or even good taste; in fact, a person's wealth was the least interesting thing about them. He also wasn't the slightest bit self-conscious among people who were double if not triple his age; it was admirable, even enviable, to be so certain of one-self.

After at least two dances, the couple came to a dying twirl by him, and the elderly woman kissed Hannibal on both cheeks before releasing him.

"You've got yourself a gentleman," was all she said with a delighted sigh, before disappearing into the crowd.

Hannibal smirked, not even winded, "Would you like a spin?"

It was inevitable, Will supposed. With a sigh, he took the alpha's hand and let himself be pulled in. Hannibal threw him an endlessly patient look of deep amusement, and then they were dancing.

Will? Are you still with me?

He came to a stop by the double-doors, "This is me."

Hannibal smiled warmly and reached for his hips, the touch proprietary. Will closed his eyes and tilted his head for a kiss. It was affectionate and a little wet. He shivered and blinked, feeling like he was acting a part where he knew none of the lines.

"Goodnight," the alpha whispered. "Tomorrow, breakfast?"

Will stared down at the man's collar with a small smile and nodded.

He watched until the alpha's figure disappeared around the corner into Dumaine, on his way back to his temporary apartment on the intersection of Chartres and Governor Nicholls. Then he left, rounding the corner and entering through the backdoor despite the fact that it wasn't afterhours. He could hear the TV blaring downstairs in the common room as he walked past the kitchen and into the laundry, digging past the top layer of clothes in his basket for the plastic bag of stuff he'd hidden there. It took moments to change into a dark blue shirt, black jeans, black second-hand shoes he'd picked up for a dollar. He slicked his hair behind his ears with water from the laundry sink, ensuring that everyone would see his face in all its starkness, not that they'd see all that much in the dimness of the bars and clubs. Finishing his preparations, Will tucked the handheld revolver he'd confiscated off an underage gangbanger

into his jacket pocket, and hid the utility knife he'd picked up from the station's Lost and Found.

Then he left, shrugging on his winter jacket.

Crossing the street, Will headed for Bourbon, walking past the bars on the popular and well-publicized tourist strip for the clubs and bars on the intersecting laneways. It took three different places before he found who he was looking for.

Alpha Number Four was enjoying himself in Les Chandelles, one arm slung around the shoulders of a girl who was practically a child (*betas are more malleable when they're younger*, he heard in the cavern of his mind, *I fuck them like an animal and they take it – this is sex I tell them, this is the thing you've been dreaming of, a big alpha cock ploughing you*). Upscale and chic in a vulgar way, it took up the entire second level of an old mansion that had been converted into a burlesque show downstairs. Will sat, allowed someone to buy him a drink and found a beta woman to chat with – Ashley wasn't attracted to him, but liked the attention of being seen with an omega. Unexpectedly, she proved to be useful to his plans as she knew at least a third of the patrons, including the man Will had come to find.

"*Hello*," the alpha beamed, attempting to sound debonair and instead sounding only obsequious, visibly and audibly drunk off his face, yet with enough sense to know that a golden goose stood in front of him and he should pay attention. "What's your name, gorgeous?"

The girl at the alpha's side blinked up at Will, visibly uncomfortable being there; her eyes which had darted around the room, weighing and judging – her first time, he would say – flew back to focus on him. She couldn't have been older than twenty, and her innocent dark-brown eyes widened as her nose picked up on his scent; but surely, omegas didn't come to places like *this*.

"This is Adam," his new drinking buddy cheerfully lied for him.

Half an hour later, Ashley had disappeared with a beta man she had struck up a conversation with on the next couch, and Will suggested to his target that they could find somewhere private. The man's wide eager smile made him feel dirty but he kept his expression pleasant, interested. The girl seemed relieved to be abandoned and replaced by worthier prey, disappearing as soon as they exited the bar.

Will left with him.

The walk to the man's condo was short, two blocks. They were practically neighbors, Will and him.

The alpha was drunk, and so excited at the prospect of having an omega, even if he might get nothing but a hand job tonight instead of the racy sex he usually indulged in, excited at the mere prospect he might be enjoying Will's company and hopefully more at some later date. He didn't want to rush things, not with an omega. He offered to hang up Will's jacket, offered to get him a drink, even food if Will felt like it – he had all the late-night food places on speed-dial, they would deliver.

Will unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt, exposing his smooth chest.

The alpha's offers of hospitality died off and he stared like he'd never seen skin before.

Contorting his face into a mimicry of a smile and hoping the man was drunk enough to miss it's falseness, he requested some music be put on, the lights dimmed.

Number Four scrambled to comply.

Taking a few steps back so he's pressed against the balcony doors, Will took deep slow breaths, bracing himself.

He didn't wait for the first verse of the dance track to finish before pulling the gun and shooting the man clear through the neck. Like a slow-motion movie scene, the alpha froze in horrified shock, eyes bulging comically in that split second before inertia kicked in and he started to topple. The man collapsed, keeling sideways to hit the floor with a smack as blood jutting out from the hole on his neck, frothing like champagne shaken and stirred.

Will? What do you see? What's wrong?

The omega closed the curtains, back still turned to the balcony doors. He rounded the dying man and looked into the bastard's haggard face, mouth open and soundless, blood pouring out. The alpha writhed in pain, the blood from his torn throat travelling up and leaking out between his lips, his nostrils. It was like watching a fish fight for breath on land.

He waited until the twitching and gasping stopped, before pulling out the utility knife, releasing the retractable blade.

You had it coming, he thought over the gaining crescendo of screams ripping through his head, *this mocking.*

Will? What do you see?

WILL? CAN YOU HEAR ME?

OPEN YOUR EYES.

Shooting upright, Will was on his feet before his brain registered that he had nowhere to go. He slammed into the edge of the table and it was only luck that allowed him to fumble for the metronome before it toppled off the edge and onto the floor. The images howled at him, and he could smell the coppery scent of blood, like the fragmented memories had bled into the present and slithered down his gullet through his nostrils. He could taste it. He was choking on it.

He didn't know how he ended up standing by the armchair, backing away to hit the bookshelf. "This isn't working."

Alana was on her feet, china blue eyes dilated in distress, her stance wide as though she was preparing to defend herself – or escape to bring back-up.

“What did you see?” She demanded, her voice edging between apprehension and civilized panic; she was afraid that she’d miscalculated, that instead of helping him, she’d hurt him.

He didn’t answer her, turning away instead and running a shaky hand through his hair, ruining whatever order it had been in. Sweat covered his back and ran down the sides of his face. He felt like he had run up three-flights of stairs only to be thrown back down. He wanted to be sick. He knew what he saw, he could remember the thoughts that he was thinking; smells, temperature, humidity or lack of, cruel calculations, morbid little observations, humor, affection; the glint of sunshine dusting Hannibal’s eyelashes when he glanced down at the works of a street artist, the afternoon sun slanted against the side of his head; the warmth of his victim’s skin through the disposable gloves stolen from CSI as he undid the jeans, jerked them down, and cut out what he wanted – *you had it coming, this mocking… you had it coming…*

Will scrubbed his hands across his eyes and mouth, but the images were already there, already settling. Like blood on white, he felt *stained*. His throat was thick with bile. He coughed, and then he coughed again, until he couldn’t stop and felt like he was suffocating.

“Will?” The beta cried, “Will!”

Somehow he managed to stumble his way to a wastebasket. The half-digested remains of lunch and rancid coffee came flying out of his mouth, his ribs squeezing, stomach heaving, until it felt like both his stomach and his lungs were completely crushed.

When he came back to his sense, he found himself slumped panting and exhausted against the side of Alana’s desk, her bin in his lap and the beta crouched next to him, her phone clutched like a talisman in her hand.

“Will?” She asked gently, not daring to touch him even now.

“I’m okay,” he rasped.

She smiled feebly and didn’t call him out on the lie. “What did you see?”

Will took a deep breath and didn’t answer her.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

His opportunity came after Friday lunch, when Junior went down for his usual afternoon nap. He disappeared into the study with the baby monitor, raw from the half-understood memories of his session with Alana, and did a search for Victoria Haschen on Facebook. None of the

photos matched even in the slightest to his old partner in Homicide. A wider search online for the New Orleans Police Department drew him to the general City of New Orleans website – there's no personnel listings, but Will didn't expect there to be any. He didn't know the current superintendent but there's a listing for the various districts including the names of the commanders; he's pleased to see at least two familiar names including Trisha LeChembeau, someone he knew from his academy days.

Will fiddled with his phone before trying the First District station. A young woman answered, sounding polite though annoyed with a drawl that made his chest tighten in nostalgia. When he asked for the station commander, he's told in no uncertain terms that the chief was in a meeting with the higher-ups that had no chance in hell of finishing before dinnertime. Any attempts to ask her if she knew an Officer Haschen, or could possibly transfer him to someone who might know of her, were firmly met with polite referrals to the website's other phone numbers and a disclaimer that the NOPD was not in the habit of giving out personal details on officers, both current and past, to anyone, not even if he claimed to be Superintendent Harrison himself.

"What'd you say your name was again?" She asked, when he convinced her to ask around and see if any of the detectives would speak to him.

"Will Graham-Lecter," he said, purposely mirroring her drawl, "but I was just Will Graham when I was serving."

"Uh-huh," the dull roar of background noise and ringing phones rose as she left whatever nook she was assigned to and presumably entered the bullpen, "And which district was that?"

"First," he said tersely, just barely managing to hold back the bite in his voice – the last thing he wanted was to be hung up on for being a smartass.

He listened closely as she half-spoke half-rambled as she wandered the length of the bullpen, asking the officers she came across if they'd been here in 2002 and if they knew an Officer Graham back then. There's lot of negatives, but it's a long shot anyway. Just when it seemed that the phone call would be a loss, someone asked to speak to him.

"Will Graham?" A vaguely familiar voice boomed, "Will Baby-Face Graham?"

Will raised his eyes from the mosaic tiles of the study at the familiar nickname.

"Sergeant?" He asked, incredulous that the beta was back in New Orleans and not happily settled in Texas as he had assumed, since the man was married to a wealthy Texan socialite and her family had finally succeeded in convincing the young couple to move in early 2002. He wondered what happened.

"Actually, it's detective now, I took over from Hawkins, can you believe it?" George Silva chuckled, "You're a blast from the past, kid."

"Hopefully a pleasant one."

“But of course – it’s always lovely to hear from an old friend,” Silva replied easily, oozing with that Caribbean charm which had won over his wife, Kelly. Suddenly it was as if he were there, standing face to face with the man, a hulking figure of a man, dark-skinned and fit, who was beaming at him, teeth bright. “How’s life been treating you? God, it’s been thirteen years hasn’t it – almost fourteen.”

“Yeah,” he smiled weakly, pained by the reminder of all the memories lost to him.

“How’s Kelly?” He asked tentatively, wondering if the reason the man was back in New Orleans was because of a divorce. But there’s nothing edgy or bittersweet about the once-sergeant’s reply when he proudly announced that she finally achieved tenure and was happily settled at the university.

“Congratulations,” he said, though he couldn’t for the life of him remember what Kelly Silva’s profession was – academia obviously, but that was like saying you owned a car.

“Daniel is going to be turning fifteen this year – can you believe it? You remember him? He used to love hanging onto you. I got another one, she’s going on nine this year.”

Will’s mouth twitched – yes he remembered Daniel Silva, the beta’s firstborn who had particularly taken to him when the sergeant brought the one-year old along when he had to come in from rostered leave to sign off on something or other. Their conversation drifted from place to place – that he was working for Quantico now, that he enjoyed living in Baltimore and yes he’s fine with all the snowing, that the ex-sergeant was senior detective and head of vice these days, and that he did casual shifts with the private security initiative looking after the Quarter on occasion.

“You got any rugrats yet, Graham?” Silva asked cheerfully, “I heard you got married. Man, why’d have to do that when I was outta state?”

Will hesitated, before admitting with a odd-sense of disorientation and undeniable pride that his eldest, Tomas, was going to turn thirteen in September and he had three others, two boys and a little girl.

“You have *four* kids?!” George Silva laughed loudly. Will smiled reluctantly, unable to ignore the obvious surprise and delight of the other man, “Shit, Graham, when you make a major life decision you sure go for it – *four*, man, *how* are you sane?”

Sometimes, he wondered himself. “My husband is a psychiatrist.”

“That’s what I need – a shrink,” the ex-sergeant chuckled, then with the unerring instinct for timing that made the man a good interrogator, he changed the subject, “So what can I do you for? I doubt you’re calling to catch up.”

“I don’t know how to say it.”

“Just say it, kid.”

Will took a deep breath and explained in haltingly about the car accident, fudging the details about how badly the memory loss extended, instead making it seem as though some things were as clear as if they had happened yesterday, other memories were completely lost to him.

“You alright now?” Silva asked, his concern clear.

“I’m fine.”

The man made a noise, like he wasn’t quite sure if he believed his ex-colleague. Will supposed that was fair enough, considering that he had a reputation for downplaying his injuries. “I assume you need help putting some pieces together.”

“Actually, I’m looking for Haschen. Do you know where she transferred to?”

The phone went silent.

“Hello?” Will asked, concerned that the call had dropped out for one reason or another.

“I’m here, kid,” George Silva replied quickly, and took a deep audible sigh. “Listen, Will,” there was another noise, like a hand rubbing over scratchy stubble, “I’m not sure I should be doing this over the phone. Could you sit down?”

A million thoughts went through his mind.

Will Graham sat down.

Chapter End Notes

I must dedicated this chapter to Eclectic. I was fairly depressed coming out of hospital and she really cheered me through the last few weeks, along with Septima and others, and was especially kind in spending time with me virtually while I wrote this chapter, allowing me to give her progress reports and be encouraged regularly. Thank you
To RagnaBuck, I hope you enjoyed the dates - no meet-cute but a worthy replacement I hope :)
Thanks to everyone for their comments and kudos.
EDIT - so just to add, the memories of the dates and the murder is all jumbled up, those are outtakes between Sep2002 and Dec2002
(Also I think I promised to put something about my verse here in end notes but I can't remember what I was supposed to explain here)

प्रारब्ध कर्म

Chapter Summary

First blood, a casual dinner with friends and a moment with family, and fourteen years ago, their first breakfast together.

Chapter Notes

The title is "prarabdha karma", which is the consequences accumulated in previous lives manifesting themselves as experiences in your current life. I apologize if the Hindi script isn't correct. I tried my best :)
I have had another trying two weeks, my health just seems to not want to move post-hospital. Please enjoy the story. It gives me great joy to know it's being read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 6 October 2002

There was a pair of birds whistling overhead, their accompanying chirps keeping pace with him as he trudged through the undergrowth back towards where he'd set up camp. At some point, the birds disappeared, leaving him with only the crunch of his footsteps and the rush of the stream. Between the trunks decked in autumn yellow, the river glinted. It took only a few minutes to arrive at the clearing, close enough to the river that he could hear the sound of the water running over the boulder stones but far enough that anyone else using the stream wouldn't disturb him.

Will Graham kneeled to unload the fish over his shoulder, throwing it onto the block of wood he'd promoted to be his chopping board and food prep counter for the time. He carefully laid down his rod, reel locked in place, as well as his net then cleaned his fish-slimed hands with a damp rag. He shrugged off his fly vest as he wandered over to his car, then struggled out of his waders. He started a fire next, kept in place by a circle of smooth river stones, then went to retrieve his knife.

Slipping it from its sheath, Will glanced at his own reflection in the flat of the blade as he returned to his lured prey. It's the work of a moment to split his first fish of the trip from base to gills. Blood seeped out straight away. As it drained, he wormed a finger into the cavity, feeling for its guts and gentling tugging the organs free. Fish blood pooled over the tree stump, thick and dark, and began to drip upon the mulch and foliage-strewn forest floor.

Overhead, the sun disappeared behind a black cloud. Will glanced up, confused by the sudden change in weather – it was supposed to be sunny the entire weekend.

His hands were slick with red blood, the stink of fish and earth in his nose. Will closed his eyes, momentarily overcome by the briny bitter stink of it all and furrowed his brows at a detail he'd almost missed in his concentration. Will's eyes snapped open as he frowned, confused.

He glanced over his shoulder; the forest was utterly silent.

When he turned back around, the fish was gone, replaced with a cool thin rail of metal. Will flinched, his eyes widening as awareness blossomed outwards in a sudden clap of clarity. The alpha he was straddling choked and sputtered, red spittle flying out of his mouth as his lips opened and closed like fish gills. His throat was an open-wound of red, hot liquid guzzling out as the man drowned slowly, painfully, in his own blood.

Will's eyes flew from the switchblade in his left hand to the harpoon in his right. His panic ebbed away as his breaths relaxed, the evening's events coming back to him.

Slowly, with far more care than he had shown when the man was alive, he got off the alpha and backed away. He stood at the foot of the bed, breathing hard as he struggled to remembered the rest of the plan. Alpha Number One was spread out on the tossed bedcovers, his limbs akimbo, his gaze empty, throat bloodied. The stink of urine, feces and blood all mixed together in a potent cocktail. The alpha had been drinking; his piss had the sharp acidic notes of alcohol. Will felt his gag reflex shudder, his stomach turning; his heart rate shot up like a geyser, exploding through his body in a flare of heat.

Taking one deep breath and then another, Will closed his eyes. He'd had a minor moment of confusion. It was the adrenalin rush, he supposed, all the anxieties of the past few weeks and the battle within him culminating in one moment of intense cognitive dissonance. His clothes were soaked with sweat, from both nerves and exertion.

Then like a wire pulled too tight, his resolve snapped and deserted him, leaving the omega overwhelmed and frightened in the cool of the witching hour.

Will spun on his heel and froze at the figure blocking the doorway.

The girl stared at him, her eyes huge, fringed in dark lashes and glowing in the low-blue light of refracted moonlight. One hand was poised by her chin as if to stifle a scream, and the other held a chef's knife awkwardly. She was dressed in nothing but underwear and a sheer singlet. Her nipples were dark purple circles. She could see his face; he'd gelled his hair and worn a second-hand cap, a basic forensic counter-measure against casual glances and security cameras, but his face…she could see his face.

He waited with bated breath for her to scream. They were in the suburbs, someone would hear her and then the game would be up; he could see it now, the neighbors tumbling out of their beds in a fright at the noise, the wife patting at the husband to go and see what it was about while she called 911, someone would come out of the door with their shotgun in hand, someone else would have a hi-beam torch; they'd all come running.

She stayed silent.

Will held his breath.

“Did he have it coming?” She whispered, her accent vaguely Slavic.

Will inhaled deeply, his eyes finally piercing the shadows on her face. They weren’t shadows at all but bruises in the shape of fingers. She was beautiful, a sad cast to her features that made her seem like some brooding silver-screen starlet. She had no intentions to stab him with the kitchen knife, no urge to scream in horror and fear. She was simply one in a long string of live-in punching bags; a student with little money, she’d signed on for this, she knew what she was in for; it didn’t mean she liked it.

“What do you think?”

She lowered the knife and took a shivering gulp of air, the first in weeks, perhaps months.

“You have an hour.”

He should kill her. She had seen his face. She was liability.

Will hesitated. Watching her warily, he picked up the harpoon gun from where he’d propped it against the side of the bed and slung its strap over his shoulder. She stared after him, bare feet curling on the cold floor tiles.

He slipped out through the kitchen door, leaving it swinging free. It was dark on the streets, and between the houses he could see the lights from the river twinkling. He scanned the homes he passed for signs of life, most of them palatial two-story houses with graceful sprawling trees in the front yard, deliberate attempts to highlight a colorful colonial past. No one was up, or if they were, the lights weren’t on. He made sure to keep his head down, letting the cap hide his face.

He walked the block and turned on the corner, heading for the small laneway full of double-garage entrances he’d parked in. He had scouted out the area well-enough to know that the parking spot he’d taken without permission belonged to a couple who were on holidays; he’d seen them leaving. Will tossed the bloodied harpoon and switchblade onto the tarp he’d spread out in the trunk, grabbing the soaked rags he’d prepared earlier to wipe them down. He’ll clean them with bleach later, but for now this was good enough.

He slid the harpoon gun off his shoulder and gave it a similar wipe down, then bundled all of the rags and his bloodied rubber gloves together into a cardboard shopping bag that Hannibal had given him last week, emblazoned with the Saks Fifth Avenue logo. Next came his clothes – threadbare shirt and hopelessly outdated overalls and boots with soles worn smooth from use, bought second-hand from the local thrift store, scavenged out of the bargain bins. He stripped in the backseat, struggling into wrinkled chinos and a generic navy hooded-jacket.

He froze as a light came on in the house opposite.

Will peered at it but decided not to tempt fate. He crawled into the driver seat and started the car, backing out.

He stopped a gas station where he already knew where all the cameras were and ducked into the disabled toilets. There was a mop in one corner, unceremoniously dumped inside its bucket, the metal joint between mop-head and mop-handle slowly rusting a dark bloody orange. Will stuck his head underneath the taps half-calcified in some white powdery substance, rinsing out the gel and washing his face. He took off his jacket and used it as a towel. When he got out, he bought himself a chocolate bar he'll never eat, a bad cup of coffee, paying cash and keeping his eyes on the counter.

It took twenty-minutes for him to drive to his next stop, taking care at every turn, stopping at every red-light, though the streets were more or less deserted. When he finally arrived at the homeless camp, he pulled on his damp hooded-jacket and left the car with his bundle. No one was awake this late except for the drug addicts and the rats, and no one among them could really be counted upon to give a clear testimony of the slight figure who dropped an entire bag of flammables into the communal bonfire.

The Present

Tony Bennett was crooning softly on Robert Papparella's sound system, and the house was filled with the delicious aromas of Italian cooking; Will felt almost sickened by the smell and all its associated good-cheer. He didn't know why he was here, at the man's house on a Saturday night. He could have cancelled yesterday. He'd wanted to confront Hannibal, demand why he'd kept the information to himself. But he said nothing, unable to do more than glance at his husband before his chest started burning in shame.

He forced himself to smile politely at the beta's other guest, Anna Lerski, a sixty-year old woman of robust build and soulful brown eyes, using the toddler in his arms as a shield; the two betas had been seeing each other for four-months now, and it was serious enough that the retired agent was introducing her to friends and colleagues.

Will ate mechanically, unable to name the feeling he felt as his children served themselves, adopting the dining table etiquette of their host without batting an eyelash. He watched Tomas' careful bites, the way he would glance around the table, the responsible omega firstborn, and put down his fork to help his younger brother; Elizabeta's delighted focus on twirling the pasta *exactly* onto her fork and slurping it up, giggling when Robert Papparella mimicked her; and Micah's bulging cheeks as he chewed thoroughly as instructed by Papa, splattering a good amount of red sauce over his chin.

Anna was charmed as most people were by the children's manners, and particularly impressed with Micah's dining habits; apparently her eldest grandchild, who was also turning five this year, was prone to running away to continue playing with his X-wing fighter and needed to be shouted down to finish his dinner at all.

“Did I tell you about the dinner party?” The older man asked the woman, before launching into lavish descriptions of the entire eight-course meal at the Lecter house. Hannibal was only too happy to share the details of the menu – the fusion of Italian and Japanese was inspired by the maternal influences in his life, namely the gastronomic traditions of his mother and his aunt – but downplayed his skills, insisting that he had professional help that evening.

“He served *sanguinaccio dolce*,” The retired FBI agent chuckled, his eyes bright with remembered enjoyment, “I haven’t eaten a *sanguinaccio dolce* that delicious since I was in Calabria.”

“It is really yummy,” Eli piped up just as Micah scrunched up his face, announcing loudly that he didn’t like it; the wobbliness wasn’t like pudding at all, sorry Papa.

Rob Papparella broke out in a laugh while Anna smiled softly, charmed; Will smiled with them, buoyant on the joy at the table. He reached across to stroke a hand through the little boy’s hair. The couple were invited to come for dinner sometime in March.

“It’s a date,” the ex-agent declared, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“I hope you like seafood.”

The man raised a pointed eyebrow at the alpha, “My friend, I’m Italian – I *love* seafood.”

As the plates were cleared, Hannibal excused the children and the retired agent quickly had them set up in the lounge to watch TV. Will excused himself to clean up Junior from dinner. When he rejoined the others, the conversation had moved onto how the two betas had met; through a mutual friend, at a dinner party, Anna admitted with a bright smile as she polished off her wine. No one brought up the issue of what would happen when Will returned to work in several weeks time, and Papparella’s primary reason for the move to Virginia was removed.

“How did the two of you meet?” Anna asked, looking between them.

“I’ve been wondering that myself,” Rob nodded, leaning over to refill her glass. “I mean, I knew you were married, I saw that in your file when you were recommended to me as a consultant,” he gestured vaguely in Hannibal’s direction with the bottle, “but why didn’t you tell me that Will worked for Quantico?”

“He was only being interviewed when you came to me about the Thornton case,” Hannibal replied, smiling good-naturedly at the mock-glare he was given, “I thought not to jinx it.”

The beta made an noise of understanding and then looked to Will, waiting for an answer. He took a breath, tried to smile, felt it strangling him.

“Are those flowers I see on your desk, Mister Graham?”

Will barely glanced up from the report he was writing about a hit-and-run. “None of your business, Haschen. Don’t you have the Porter case? Hawkins went to the morgue, shouldn’t

you be there?"

Ignoring his question completely, the woman sank down with a relieved sigh into the chair he'd pulled up earlier for interviewing his witness and picked up the thick paper card attached to the tissue paper with a delicate filigree clasp. "To Officer Will Graham," she paused and threw him a sly grin, "I'm in town this weekend, dinner? Yours sincerely, Hannibal Lecter, Astoria Suite No. 1, Roosevelt Hotel. Have you been holding out on me, Graham?"

"He's a witness," Will said flatly, "I met him last week."

"The mugging thing? With the European doctor guy who fixed up that cut on your chin?" She chuckled, picking up his cup of coffee and draining it before he could stop her; he shot her an annoyed look and wrestling his cup back, left his desk to get a fresh cup from the kitchenette in the corner. Like a dog with a bone, Haschen followed him.

"My witnesses don't bring me flowers, but then I'm not you. Is he handsome? I mean, I know he's rich – I was at the Roosevelt for my cousin's wedding, I know how pricey that place is."

"He's thirty-four or thirty-five," Will shrugged, pouring himself another coffee and taking down a spare mug to pour one for her. The alpha probably wasn't that old but Haschen didn't know that – whatever his age though, there was still a definite age gap.

The beta chuckled, cockily crossing her arms. "It seems you thought about it – so he's probably not a prick, intelligent and can hold a conversation."

Will shot her a long-suffering look before going back to his desk.

"You like him," she decided, between sips of coffee.

"He's a psychiatrist," he scoffed, "He's probably planning to dissect my brain."

Victoria Haschen smiled crookedly, so amused that Will had to raise his eyebrows at her, unimpressed. "Name a kid after me when you guys get married," she ordered, pointing at him like this was an executive decision.

"You name a kid after me," he retorted absently, already trying to pick up where he'd left off on the report.

"I'm adopting," the beta announced grandly, "At my age, I'd be crazy to go through childbirth."

Will chuckled, and spun to face to his computer, double-checking the wording in the witness statements he'd typed up. "With that great review, how could I resist?"

"You have nothing to fear, rookie," the woman stood with a groan, coffee in hand, "You've got magical omega hips. Anyway, I've gotta run to the morgue."

"Bye," he said shortly, already trying to refocus on getting this done as soon as possible so he could get out of here.

“Are you gonna call him?”

“I’m working.”

“Call him,” she ordered with a smirk as she turned to leave, “You don’t want to be a virgin forever, Graham.”

Will swallowed thickly and hid his flinch at the alpha’s hand on his knee under the table.

“I was in New Orleans,” the alpha inhaled, nostalgic, “It was for work, I’d never been there before and decided to go for a walk…”

Will listened to the story of their first meeting, grateful the alpha for taking over and distracting the other couple. He placed his hand over Hannibal’s under the table and watched the toddler circle them in the little tricycle they’d brought from home for him to play with, bumping into cabinets and sometimes the leg of the dining table. He wondered vaguely how many times Hannibal had told the story; this version had more details, but it was more or less the same tale as what he heard at the hospital.

“...And then he ordered the most expensive whiskey at the bar.” Hannibal turned to him, warmth and desire in his eyes, “I thought he was the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen.”

Anna Lerski made a sound that might have been a sigh. A romantic, she loved the story; lonely workaholic alpha arriving in an unknown city for work, and restless, knowing no one, left his hotel to explore and met his future mate. It’s an unlikely match, love at first-sight, but they’re oddly compatible in temperament and wit; when they discovered they were to have a baby, they’re blissful.

Will said nothing to correct the assumptions made by the beta woman. It’s a nice story. Everyone who knew them knew the story. His children knew the story. Alana Bloom swore witness to the story. One day Tomas would tell the tale of how his parents met and fell in love to a suitor, and then if they were to be so fortunate, to his own children. Perhaps Will had even tricked himself into believing it, living the life of a stay-at-home dad – well, until a catalyst had brought the Butcher into existence.

He had no idea what pre-amnesia him believed.

Rob Papparella finished his drink and stood to clear the table. Hannibal met his gaze and held it, a gentle query of concern. Will averted his eyes.

The images came over him like half-forgotten scenes of a story; looking out of the window in Hannibal’s guest bedroom, telling himself that this would be his home now, that he would bring up his child in this house, eat the alpha’s food, sleep in his bed, wear the clothes bought for him, leave behind the lives he had led; he could do this, he had reassured himself, it was easy, a simple matter of biology; he wasn’t looking for love, he wanted security and a reason to leave his life behind, and most of all, he needed an alibi.

“Do you have any regrets?”

They were in the SUV together, Tomas listening to music on his phone and the other children fast asleep. The highway stretched before them, rising up within the circle of the headlights. There were other cars now and then but for the most part, it was quiet.

“Every choice has the possibility of regret. However if I choose to do something, it’s usually for a good reason,” the alpha murmured, then shifted slightly towards his mate, his hand curling over Will’s thigh. At the touch, the omega slowly turned his gaze from its blind stare to study Hannibal’s profile.

He had read the digital copies of everything Silva sent regarding the murder of Victoria ‘Vic’ Haschen as soon as he’d gotten them yesterday afternoon. Then he spent an hour lying on the couch, nursing a glass of whiskey, battered by the memories that tumbled into place. They had piled on top of one another, creating mounds and pyramids and hills, their weight almost physical, a sequence of events so strongly linked together that one single tug had pulled the entire thread free of the rubble. It was all connected – marrying Hannibal, Haschen’s murder, Tomas, his nascent career as a killer.

At the end of that hour, he had rinsed out his glass and gone to collect Junior from his nap, taking the toddler out for a walk with the dogs until Micah was due home from pre-school. He had forced himself through dinner, bath time, holding himself upright until he could collapse into bed. Even there he had been tormented, tossing and turning until he finally gave up on sleep and sneaked away to sit in the darkness of the study, listening to the sounds of the house settling, wondering how many more bodies were waiting to be unearthed from the depths of his mind. He had done it though, hadn’t he? He’d gotten away with murder.

Will wanted to laugh. A crowning achievement of anyone’s life – two separate killers owed their infamy to him – and he couldn't tell anyone, ever. His entire life hinged upon it, his husband’s life, his children’s lives; lies upon lies, they piled up.

It would be funny, if it wasn’t so horrifying.

Hannibal glanced at him, a hint of a smile on his mouth before turning his attention back to the road. “I can hear your thoughts.”

He stared at the man’s profile, trying to work up the energy to be angry but found it doused by an equal portion of guilt, until he was left with nothing but disorientation. It drowned out everything he’d come to know and accept; he didn’t know what to think and had no idea where to begin. This alpha adored him and had no idea, *no idea* at all; Hannibal and the children were all unwitting accomplices.

“I saw Alana on Thursday.”

The alpha didn’t pretend to be surprised, “I know.”

Will took a deep breath and forced himself to speak despite the way he felt, suffused with a unforgiving sense of loss that he couldn't assuage or deny. "Why didn't you tell me Vic Haschen was dead?"

"Telling you would have not changed anything and you would only become upset – I would have told you, in time."

But if he had known, then he might have remember the truth. If he had remembered the truth then... Will imagined an alternative departure from the hospital, leaving with nothing but himself and his wallet, using one of the three credit cards emblazoned with W. Graham-Lecter to buy a plane ticket back to New Orleans.

"Perhaps this makes me a coward but I'm relieved you remembered on your own."

"Four months," Will murmured, toneless.

"I'm sorry," the alpha offered, sincere yet also firm in his belief that he had done the right thing. Hannibal's hand sought out his in the darkness. "It was selfish, but I wanted you to be home with us again. If you had known…"

If he had known, there was no telling how he would have reacted. Hannibal had manipulated him but Will couldn't blame him – he was hardly a stranger to a little friendly manipulation, or lies by omission. He took a deep slow breath, any residue anger dispersing entirely.

"I wanted to be home too," he whispered.

Hannibal pressed a firm kiss to the hand he had captured. Will felt the gesture of tenderness ricochet within the tangled web of his nervous system and strike him somewhere soft and unprotected.

"Do you have any regrets?"

Will turned at the uncertain tone in his husband's voice. He was riddled with regret, but not about this; he glanced at the rear view mirror, saw the silhouettes of his children's peaceful faces in the pale diffused beams of light from a passing car.

"A life without regret would be no life at all," he murmured, a non-answer at best. He knew that wasn't what Hannibal wanted to hear, that the alpha wanted reassurances that Will wasn't second-guessing their life together.

"I'm trying to place myself somewhere in the frame of my mind and I keep losing my bearings. The landmarks…they keep changing."

"We are who we are in the now, and we are the sum of our memories," Hannibal mused.

He chuckled darkly, "By that definition, I'm incomplete."

"Not incomplete. There are simply pieces of you that you can't see right now," Hannibal counseled him, "But in time, you'll be able to see the whole picture."

He wasn't sure he wanted to.

Frankly, he'd seen enough. How much deeper did this hole go? Where would he end up when he crawled through to the end of it? How many more claims to infamy did he have? He didn't know who he was anymore and it scared him. His children and his dogs, the kind of mate he had chosen, those things he could make sense of, even his career as a lecturer – the knowledge of himself as a killer hadn't been quite so shocking as his memory of himself, taking life night after night.

"You're grieving, Will. Not simply for the life of Officer Haschen, but for the life that was lost to you," Hannibal gave him a comforting smile, tugging gently on his hand, threading their fingers together. "Give yourself time to recuperate, and the rest will come."

Will allowed himself to look across to the alpha and nodded in an attempt to reassure the man that his moodiness was just a passing phase. He squeeze the alpha's hand back, a paltry offering in comparison to what Hannibal had given him.

"Do you remember when I visited you? It was stupidly early, and we had breakfast in your room at the Roosevelt."

The alpha shot him a surprised look, perhaps startled by the amount of detail that he could suddenly recall, followed immediately by a bright smile, "And you finally gave into my attempts to find out where you lived."

Ah yes, the perpetual plea of '*let me walk you home, Will*' that the alpha had used hoping to get his address out of him, attempting to find another crack in the armor. He glanced down into his lap, at the shadow of their hands intertwined within the dimness of the car interior; who was it that said that courtship was siege-warfare, and you were the prize?

"I woke you up, didn't I?"

The alpha tilted his head, clearly hiding a smile as he checked his blind spot and changed lanes to head for Baltimore. "What do you remember?"

"I don't know," Will closed his eyes with a heavy sigh, "A lot. It's all up here."

He remembered everything from that day – the first glint of sunshine glimmering behind the silhouette of the New Orleans cityscape; Hannibal's hair flopped about his face in cow-licks; Henley top and cotton pajama bottoms, softening the austere aura that he usually projected in his exactly-tailored suits and neatly combed hair; Will's ears prickling at every distant wail of sirens; checking his phone every few minutes expecting someone to call, someone to tell him he needed to come in, that they knew what he had done, that he shouldn't run.

"The croissants were good."

"Actually they weren't from the hotel," Hannibal admitted.

Will frowned – but of course they were, Hannibal had ordered the pastries from the hotel kitchens hadn't he? The alpha caught his eye, mischievous and almost-preening in the face of

the younger man's confusion.

"I acquainted myself with the owner of La Boulangerie," his husband confessed, tone casual; in his mind, it was only natural for him to exert this much effort, "As soon as we finished our call, I organized for a batch of croissants to be picked up for our breakfast."

Will looked out the side window, biting back a smile as memories of all their dates were cast in a new light. He could see it; Hannibal eating his way through New Orleans in an attempt to find the perfect croissant to seduce Will with, making sure that the concierge at the hotel recognized the omega on sight and knew to show him upstairs, researching restaurant menus for their dates and then later, interrogating green grocers and butchers, winning them over with his respect for their produce and charming them with his confession – that he wanted to cook dinner for an omega who refused to be impressed.

"I believe we discussed dynamic equilibrium."

"What we see as static is actually just the average," Will quoted, voice dry.

"In every given moment, thousands of movements occur, new unions made and old unmade, all beyond our awareness," Hannibal murmured fondly, word-for-word from memory, then met Will's startled glance with a jaunty smile. It could be branded as cocky, and would be the immediate object of Will's ridicule if it wasn't refined at the edges by deep affection and a touch of nostalgia.

" Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today," Hannibal concluded with a breath, taking in the crisp cool breeze of an October morning. It was perhaps almost 7AM, and they had just finished their orders of breakfast – French Toast with scrambled eggs and bacon for Will, Eggs Hemingway for the older man.

Will leaned upon the balcony rail and looked down at the tiny figures below him, ant-like in their inexplicable movements this way or that way. Sometimes someone disappeared under an awning or into a car, which would edge out and go left or right. Sometimes his eyes followed them all the way down the street. He pulled back and took a sip of his coffee. Besides him, Hannibal surreptitiously leaned in.

"Did you just smell me?" He asked, taken aback that the alpha would be so bold.

It was one thing to subtle scent the back of his neck when pulling out Will's seat, but it was quite another to deliberately lean in while they were watching the sun rise. They had known each other for a little over one month and had only been on five dates, two of them as friends. He felt almost jittery, threatened despite the fact that he knew the doctor probably meant nothing by it.

Hannibal gave him an abashed look, a momentary flash of confusion crossing his face, before it was replaced with his usual good-natured smile. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

Will staunchly turned away to the views and suppressed his blush at the backhanded compliment, taking a sip of coffee in lieu of the derisive snort he wanted to make. It was

smooth, he'd give the alpha that, but he had stopped believing in the trappings of romance by age thirteen.

"There is life and death, beginnings and endings that are unique to every particle," Hannibal said, his tone reverent as though he were reciting love poetry. Will took a deep breath and felt that ache swell within him again.

"But to the eye that looks on the outside, it appears as though there are never any changes."

Will swallowed as soon as the last syllable left his tongue, mouth-dry and his heart thudding in his ears. The truth of these words, spoken in a hotel room in New Orleans thirteen and a half years ago, rang within him. They had spoken of karma, the link of cause and effect, of unintended consequences, and somehow this had led to dynamic equilibrium, where his electives in chemistry had come in handy. What made complexity, they had ended up asking one another; human emotions or random movements that were so far and yet so coordinated they held matter together? Will remembered that the conversation had somehow moved onto the metaphysics, before he'd finally declared he was too tired to think and let the alpha escort him back home to sleep. The next morning, on his way out the door to work, he'd been intercepted by a delivery of roses.

"Static," Hannibal said, staring at the road, mouth curved in pleasure at their scripted repartee, "until the conditions change – for the particles achieve equilibrium very quickly."

"Equilibrium is determined both by the nature of the particles," Will murmured, the words coming to him easily, his mouth curving as the pathways in his mind rewired themselves anew, taking in the sensation of holding the alpha's hand, the fullness of his heart at the gentle snores of their children dozing in the back, weaving them into the memories of his younger self experiencing Hannibal and all his possibilities for the first time, "and the media they find themselves in."

"Nature versus nurture," the alpha plucked the phrase out of the air and gave Will a glance of such potency, the words being something new, something unscripted, "On a microscopic scale."

He didn't reply, instead leaning over to rest his forehead on the alpha's shoulder for a minute.

Hannibal released his hand to drive, the traffic increasing as they left the highway, passing by the stadium as they entered Baltimore and began navigating it's intersections, a pleasant silence falling between them. A mere ten minutes later, having passed the art museum, they were already turning into their street. Hannibal pulled up in front gently and switched off the engine with a little exhale, relieved perhaps to be home. By unspoken agreement, Will went to unlock the front door and deal with the alarm, going through the house turning on the lights while Hannibal began to unbuckle the sleepy heads in the car. By the time Will returned, Tomas was already wandering up the front steps with his arms wrapped around himself shivering, blinking drowsily at the sight of Dad in the doorway.

Will slung an arm around the omega boy's shoulder as he passed, pressing a kiss to his forehead and asking him if he was okay. Tomas nodded, murmuring that he was just sleepy, and wandered into the house with a sweet, "Night, dad."

He watched until the boy disappeared around the corner to the stairs, then went to help Hannibal, who had just finished releasing everyone from their harnesses. Elizabeta was picked up first, with the alpha making a slight grunt as the full weight of the little girl settled against his shoulder. Mumbling in her slumber, the six-year old cracked her eyes open only long enough to throw her arms around her Papa before falling asleep again. Hannibal glanced fondly upon the little girl and carefully ran a hand across her head, adjusting the satin-rose hairband that had been knocked askew.

Will smiled to himself and collected Junior, who stayed deeply asleep despite being transferred from the car into Daddy's arms, and then to his Pater, who scooped him up carefully with an arm under the bottom, cradling the toddler to his chest. Almost as if he knew, the little boy dug his fingers into his father's coat and nuzzled in closer.

Arms full, Hannibal shot him a smirk and left for the house.

Will stood for a moment, in the wintery chill and looked up at the three-story townhouse. In the darkness the light from the windows seemed to bleed outwards, pushing back the night. It looked much like any other house in the street. Beside him, Micah's mouth cracked open, a whistle of air escaping as he snoozed on. The omega shook off his thoughts and scooped up the little boy from where he'd been listing to the left, cradling him to his chest as he shut the car door and went inside, bumping the door close with his hip.

The alpha was still navigating the last few steps of the stairs when Will caught up with him, weighed down as he was by two children. They worked together in concert, settling Micah down upon his bed before Will took charge of Junior so Hannibal could handle Elizabeta. The omega disappeared upstairs into the nursery to change the toddler and put him down in his crib, before doing a short stop in the bedroom to get out of his coat.

Hannibal glanced up with a smile when he tiptoed into the little girl's room, warm damp towel in hand as the alpha helped a groggy Eli wiped down her face and hands. The boots were already off, as was her favorite frock coat, but Will could see that nothing else had been dealt with. With a small sigh, he quirked a smile at his husband as he crouched down to tug off her wool dress, taking over so Hannibal could go take care of Micah. He murmured for her to lift to her arms, and was relieved when she did without needing any further prompting. After that it was short work to get her hairband off and roll her under the covers.

The six-year old grabbed a handful of Will's jumper as he tried to leave.

"Goodnight daddy," she mumbled drowsily.

He softened at the sight of her, his little girl, pink-cheeked and warm under her mint-colored doona. Leaning back down he pressed a firm kiss to her forehead, "Goodnight, sweetheart."

By the time he flipped on the night light and swung the door closed, leaving only a crack, she was fast asleep.

The Past: 6 October 2002

Elegant hands picked up the glass pitcher and poured with practiced ease. Will stared at the stream of orange juice tippling into his glass, his mind still trying to catch up with the last twelve hours. Across the small well-appointed table complete with a fresh-flower bouquet, Hannibal Lecter searched his face, a half-smile curving his mouth. Behind the man, through the wide-flung double doors leading onto the balcony, the New Orleans skyline was a shadowed in the deep blue light of predawn.

"You look as though you're still half asleep."

"I feel like I'm half-asleep."

The alpha threw him an amused look. He turned his attention to the concierge, a young man charged with waiting upon Hannibal for the duration of his stay at the Roosevelt. His name was Jim or Tim or something, Will had no idea; he hadn't really been paying attention when the beta had introduced himself with a toothy smile downstairs, unlocking the hotel reception doors and waving him in with cheer that was out of place for 5AM, telling him that Doctor Lecter was waiting for him upstairs, his mind a blank as the evening's events soaked themselves within the membranes of his brain.

Will picked up the juice and took a sip, putting the glass down before anyone could notice that his hand was shaking slightly. Across town right now, the young woman was dialing 911 and hopefully doing a good job of being a confused and frightened house guest, who had woken to find her host dead.

Hannibal signed for the room service, and surreptitiously tipped the beta with a twenty-dollar note. Tim or Jim left with a knowing smile, advising them that he'll be back soon with their orders.

"Um," Will began as soon as they were alone, somewhere between awkward and apologetic, "I'm sorry – I wasn't really thinking when I called."

"I'm glad you did," the alpha replied easily, shaking out his napkin before he reached for one of the steaming croissants in the bread basket. "I was going to invite you for breakfast but wasn't sure what time you woke. Your timing was impeccable."

Will huffed under his breath and didn't call bullshit.

Hannibal's mouth stretched in a wry smile before turning his attention back to his plate, picking up the butter knife. The pastries smelled like they had just come out of the oven, a toasty almost-sweet aroma; considering how early it was, they probably *had* just come out of the oven. The buttery aroma slipped into his mouth between sips of juice, taking away the iron-taste of blood.

"A nightmare?"

Will deliberated before nodding faintly, almost embarrassed at his own lie of an excuse for waking the man up so early. It made him sound so…*needy*. He unfolded his napkin and served himself a croissant.

“Is it related to a case?” Hannibal queried gently.

“Something like that.”

It wasn’t a lie, he told himself, it was about a case; someone had murdered Victoria Haschen, after all; the culprits had to pay.

“Ideas and perceived experiences have the same effect on our minds as tossing rocks into a pond,” Hannibal murmured as he ate, “It’s hardly surprising when the detritus and reflections of our day to day end up rippling through our unconscious.”

Will found himself looking at the alpha, surprised by the description – and in agreement, despite his usual urge to be contrary. “Some days it feels like a wave…”

“Am I allowed to ask questions or is it confidential?”

His partner for all of six-months had been killed on her night off walking home from the store – in her shopping bag she had peanut butter, orange juice and bread. She had been beaten over the head, again and again, until she’d burst like a over-ripe watermelon. She had been exposed in the aftermath, breasts, hips, thighs, and no one knew if it was the killer humiliating her or some drunken jackass who thought it would be funny (it was the killers, Will knew because he *knew*).

She had left behind a partner, a dog, a mother, a brother and two uncles and an aunt and five cousins, two ex-partners on the force and an omega rookie detective who no one wanted to partner with. It was public knowledge, her death; the ensuing carnage, between the doorways of houses and long sterile hallways of the NOPD, that was private.

“I’m pretty certain its confidential.”

The alpha watched him for a moment, perhaps trying to gauge his mood; Will imagined it must be difficult, since he was behaving unlike himself.

“I will attempt not to pry.”

“Probably a good idea. I don’t want to have to shoot you.”

Hannibal’s smile widened, as though he were charmed by the subtle threat. Will’s brows furrowed even as he returned the smile then took another bite of the croissant. It crisped between his teeth, but quickly turned tender and chewy in the moisture of his mouth. The taste of it spread across his tongue as he watched the alpha staring at him, mirroring his enjoyment of the pastries.

“Is this a date?”

“Do you want this to be a date?” The alpha replied, eying him with amusement.

Will shrugged, “I thought this was breakfast.”

Hannibal Lecter chuckled, and poured himself another cup of tea. The smell of it, coy yet aromatic, wafted between them and seemed to only make Will’s hunger pangs worse.

“I’d like to think we’re simply enjoying each others' company; a date implies ulterior motives.” Framed against the washed-out blue of an encroaching dawn, the alpha gave him a curious look, “Do you have ulterior motives, Will?”

Suddenly he was back there, the alpha bucking between his legs, the sheets twisting beneath him as he held the man down until the thrashing stopped, blood soaking the pillows and sheets. He swallowed and felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of his neck. Hunger gurgled within his stomach. Will supposed that one could work up an appetite, committing murder.

“Other than your company?”

At that Hannibal chuckled; he knew perfectly well that Will meant exactly the opposite but he enjoyed the omega’s company anyway, perhaps enjoying it all the more better for it; Will’s persistent refusal to be impressed with him was its own charm.

“One can only see what one observes,” the alpha said, “and one observes only things which are already on the mind.”

Their gazes met across the table, as though Will was compelled to look.

“What's on your mind?” Hannibal asked frankly.

It took him a moment to answer, but when he did, his voice was hoarse as if he had been running all night long; “Karma.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Eclectic who helped with the conversation about dynamic equilibrium, chemistry major and all that she was. Thank you to Kyuu for the geography stuff - despite her constant insistence she is bad at it.
There is an upcoming chapter with lots of opportunities for fluff, if anyone has any requests for things they want to see with the kids, please let me know - I already have a zoo visit planned
I may not be able to fit more than a few ideas but I'll definitely save any suggestions you guys have for next time
Thank you so much to everyone who comments/kudos. I don't reply every time, but please know I really appreciate it.

क्रियामण कर्म

Chapter Summary

The past life and courtship of one Will Graham

Chapter Notes

Title is - kriyamana karma, the consequences of one's current life, accumulating for the future.
THIS IS AN ENTIRE CHAPTER SET IN THE PAST
Warnings - there's the description of a child's death. Will and Hannibal are discussing a case Will was involved in. Some may find it graphic.
Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 October 2002

“The definition of murder can be problematic – after all, laws themselves are subject to the whims of men.”

Will Graham looked up tiredly from where he’d been mindlessly staring at the glossy surface of the tabletop. It took effort to shake off the week, to re-establish himself in the quiet little corner of the bar at the Roosevelt Hotel they had taken over. He caught the brief lick of a dry mouth, the hidden swallow as the alpha remembered the circumstances that had led to the demise of his entire family. Hannibal Lecter VII’s death hadn’t been considered murder; it had been a lawful killing of a treasonous troublemaker; the death of the family was considered acceptable collateral.

He didn’t know if it was some subtle signal that the alpha gave off or a very large tip, but no one was seated anywhere near them.

“Human sacrifice, summary executions, euthanasia, genocide – you and I know state-sanctioned murder has been around for as long as there has been civilisation, and yet we would now classify them all as heinous and cruel acts.”

Despite his habit of not looking into eyes, Will found his gaze searching out Hannibal Lecter’s warm brown gaze. Not a goad, he realized, but a genuine desire to make him consider all parts of the equation. He glanced away again, relaxing into the man’s ease. He didn’t know why he had brought up the Valdez case to the alpha, or why Hannibal was even

still talking to him about it, trying to help him make sense of everything. He appreciated it even if part of him squirmed and wished they could go back to talking about their childhoods.

“Most cultures consider murder wrong.”

“That is a modern sentiment. For a long time, the first act was wrong – but the consequences of that murder, up to and including the murder of the killer and everyone associated with him, were often acceptable.”

An eye for an eye…

He took a sip of his whiskey, something sweet and almost smoky.

The alpha shifted back in his seat and took a drink, his eyes never leaving Will alone for even a second. It was not the empty carnal gaze he was familiar with but something thoughtful, something kind. He shifted uncomfortably, unused to the attention.

“Did you meet him, Valdez?”

Will nodded faintly, unable to quite control the strange sensation that flared up in him; it might be guilt, he didn’t know; it probably was.

He recalled the stubborn tilt of the man’s chin, the way his eyes had been red-rimmed, his pupils pinpricks and almost alien. His profile had helped catch the man but he couldn’t help but feel disorientated, disenchanted. He had no answer for Hannibal’s questions because he knew the crushing sense of grief, the fifteen-minutes stolen in the shower every morning hiding his distress, staring at himself in the mirror – he had been inside this man’s head, wore his skin, tried on his madness. Will had retreated after the interview, the collective grief of his colleagues gushing out of where he had buried it, like a jettison of hot steam. The tangled web of fury, vengeance, hurt and confusion had broken all the carefully constructed reasons and excuses about why he hadn’t done anything when *he knew*, he knew who had murdered her.

(There was no concrete forensic evidence that they were present at the crime scene. Nothing but speculation that they had conspired to kill her. They were each other’s alibis. Everything was circumstantial. The only thing he could offer a judge would be his testimony and that wasn’t enough; omegas were often empathetic, they were not telepathic. But he *knew*.)

Hannibal sighed, “What he did was unlawful, and yet I can’t find it in me to wish him punished for it.”

Love. Devastation. Horror. Madness.

He felt his heart tighten in pain as he ran a thumb along the rim of his glass, “It was revenge.”

“Revenge implies he was wronged – was he?”

He hid his flinch as he recalled the pictures of the corpse, little girl no more than five-years old, as grey as marble in her little face, fists full of dirt, purple marks along the fissure lines of her body. Suddenly it wasn’t a girl but Haschen on the slab, her eyes closed, brows

furrowed as though she was still in pain, slashes of dried blood across her cheeks, nose and mouth; the fragments of her skull and brain, tangled hair matted with dark red, on a separate tray next to her.

He ran a hand along his eyes, wiped the images away; thought about the bargain-bin clothes smelling mildly of mildew in his car; remembered his glimpses of Alpha Number One through the windows of the man's house when he drove by after his shifts.

"You told me once that while everyone could kill, the ones who derived a sense of power or pleasure from taking a life were in your opinion, the only ones who should be called murderers."

The alpha didn't say it but Will heard the question anyway; had the beta derived a sense of power or pleasure from his murders of those two young men?

No, Valdez had wanted the world to make sense again, something that no amount of grief counselling, meditation or reassurances by police had been able to give him. He hadn't felt powerful, or wanted to be godlike; his act had been driven by desperation, disorientation, tormented by the notion that his daughter had suffered in her death, driven to madness by his desperation as they lay there broken on the lawn of some stranger's house; she had expired next to her father, wheezing for air until she couldn't. Valdez saw no choices before him except to avenge her.

Will knew how the beta felt, knew intimately. He swallowed another heavy mouthful of whiskey and refused to glance at the ghost by his back, the woman haunting him.

"Revenge isn't very correct," Will murmured, averting his eyes from the earnest gaze of Hannibal Lecter.

"Haven't you ever wanted revenge?"

Will hesitated, a swell of conflicting emotions rising as he recalled Haschen's blank stare.

"It's not up to me to decide his case."

"Perhaps not, but the men he killed were far from innocent."

Will watched an elderly couple settle in at the bar, obviously tourists with their soft leather walking sandals, their cameras resting on the counter next to their open menus, their heads turning to and fro as they took in the historical drinking establishment. He took another sip of his drink to stop himself from agreeing.

The beta would plead not-guilty. His public defender was already preparing the case; desperate grief-struck father, not in his right mind after the death of his daughter who had been killed in the same incident that had disabled him that wasn't really a car accident so much as a deliberate act of malice, an overreaction to perceived insult. It was understandable. It was human. It was a good person driven to do the wrong thing.

Sentiments at the station were divided. Will wasn't sure which side of the line he was on anymore.

"Do you think the men had any idea of the consequences of their actions?"

"It wasn't at the forefront of their minds," Will muttered, his bemusement bitter.

No, they'd been too preoccupied with their anger, their sense of entitlement, their petty humiliation. They deserved better; Valdez couldn't be allowed to think that he could get away with disrespecting them like this; the beta deserved punishment; that they had power, that they could make him pay and they would prove it to the man.

(They were the same breed of creatures as the men who killed her, who had exposed her; she was shamed for they despised her, a beta daring to come after them with the law; their kind made the law, didn't she know?)

Will drained his lukewarm whiskey as he tried to take away the sourness in his mouth; he felt the poisonous circular thoughts drain out between one breath and another.

(Short of wiping their memories, they would never change. There were other ways of influence than violence; but violence was what they understood.)

"Some people are beyond rehabilitation."

"Some people," Hannibal agreed quietly, an admittance of the truth; the man was uninterested in keeping up appearances, uninterested in saying the 'correct' thing – no, he wanted Will to know him, even the controversial parts, and he wanted to know everything about the omega in return, frailties peeves and all.

Will stared at the alpha for a long sober moment, before shyly averting his gaze.

"You're a psychiatrist – aren't you're in the business of rehabilitation?"

"I help people achieve a greater awareness of themselves, but what they do with that knowledge is their choice;" Hannibal told him frankly, "If rehabilitation were always guaranteed, there would be no need for psychiatric facilities."

"Or prison," he drawled, voice dry.

The alpha's mouth twitched. "Or prison."

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26 December 2002

There was a baby crying a few rows back, the shattering wails cutting through any sense of peace Will might have had. With his eyes closed, he sensed the attendant dashing past him to

enter the economy cabin, her concern wafting around her like a physical aura. She's an omega and had been particularly accommodating, reading him as easily as he read her – that he was nervous, that she was concerned, that he was anxious, that she was content, that he was dreading and longing for what awaited him at the end of this plane ride, that she missed home and couldn't wait to be there. Will called up the image of the alpha; Hannibal Lecter's face came to him easily, sharp as crystal. In this alpha was his whole future, and nothing else mattered; as Miss Delia liked to say, the best revenge was living well.

The atmosphere at work was tense and he had been relieved to leave town. No one suspected him, in the sense that everyone else who knew anything about Haschen's last case were also under the spotlight. Will had been in the first round of interviewees. His alibi had stood up under scrutiny because one person committed these crimes and during the first murder, he had enjoyed a very early breakfast date at the Roosevelt Hotel – yes, the concierge had confirmed, Mister Graham visited a guest here and did not leave until midday – while James Augustus Hinton's sex organs had been removed. The young woman had waited just as she had promised to call the police – and by castrating the dead alpha, she had given him an iron-clad alibi.

During the second murder, enacted almost three weeks after the first one – even psychopaths got cold feet, the detectives theorized – the story was that he'd spent the day in the company of an alpha suitor and gone straight to bed; no one saw him come in because they were too busy watching a re-run of *Dr. No*, but everyone saw him in the morning, stumbling downstairs half-dressed when the alpha arrived at his door to take him out for breakfast.

Will took a breath and rubbed at his sore eyes. There's no witnesses to the deaths of victim numbers three and four, but the second kill, Alpha Number Four, had been sloppy; he should have waited. It had been dumb luck that the bartenders at *Les Chandelles* seemed to have trouble remembering the unknown male in the company of the second victim, their statements conflicting one another; witness Ashley Jackson couldn't remember much having 'drunk' too much later that evening at a private party. Omega, she had mumbled, eyes bloodshot from drugs; college-aged and mid-West perhaps?

There was nothing to do but leave, to remove himself from triggering any alcohol-soaked memories. He knew what awaited him if he were caught. Death, if they were kind to him – and they won't be kind – or a slow lingering descent into madness, living out his days in a psychiatric facility. He would be studied; omegas didn't murder in cold blood, they fought fiercely to protect their own but pre-meditated killing? No, it was supposed to be impossible. Omegas didn't take revenge; unless of course, something was wrong with you.

Will opened his eyes slowly, breathing deep, and took in the placid whites and blues of the airplane cabin. His first drink had already been drained within a minute of arriving, and now the ice from his third whiskey melted slowly within the plastic cup, turning sometimes in its own puddle, his curled fingers damp with condensation. There was supposed to be snacks served, but Will wasn't sure he could eat anything. For all his forward momentum, he found himself suddenly wracked with self-doubt. He knew where he wanted this whole thing to end, but the middle…

The baby's wails died off slowly; Will felt the relief from the other passengers. The attendant wandered past, slightly unsteady as the plane shook from turbulence. The captain's voice came on and advised everyone to stay in their seats and belt up. Will closed his eyes again, exhaustion hitting him hard as the last few weeks of tension left him. Overhead, the captain announced that refreshments would be coming around shortly.

Will slumped into an exhausted sleep, waking only as the plane touched down.

Baltimore was a wash of grey and white, temperatures cold enough that none of the snow or solid rain from prior days had melted. Will found himself staring out at the bleakness as he walked towards the luggage carousel with the throngs of disembarking passengers, trying to avoid being drawn in by flaring tempers or frazzled anxieties as everyone jostled for room. He wondered with some trepidation if the clothes he had were enough; he wore his warmest jacket, but it hadn't been made for North East climates.

Will exited the arrival gates and spotted Hannibal Lecter almost immediately. There were taller men in the arrivals hall, but none so well-dressed or with such graceful deportment. In a sea of dark coats and colorful parkas, Hannibal's camel winter coat was a splash of difference; on his arm was an extra coat in dark emerald green. Still far enough to remain unnoticed, Will watched as the alpha bent to assist a young child, three or four-years old, who had tripped in front of him, settling the little girl on her feet before crouching down on one knee in his undoubtedly very expensive wool trousers to tie her shoe laces. She watched him avidly until her harried mother appeared with a grateful smile to draw her away, another child dangling from her arms. Hannibal watched the young family until they disappeared out the doors and into the cold.

Will took a bracing breath as he approached the man from the side. There was no room for regrets or a change of heart; he had set himself on this course before he knew truly what his actions would bring. He had never really thought about the kind of alpha that he might choose, but even without the events unfolding in New Orleans, Hannibal was the only suitable option; no other alpha had ever wanted to know him, rather than just trying to win him. The alpha was sweet to him, and infinitely charming; Will knew little about love, but he knew the alpha fancied himself in love with what he saw of Will, and believed his feelings reflected.

Hannibal's entire countenance lifted as their eyes met, like a suddenly lit spark. The omega smiled back, an awkward gesture that slowly grew genuine as he took in the older man's honest delight. He didn't know if they were supposed to hug or kiss, but the alpha made the decision for him when he boldly slid his hands around Will's waist and pressed a cool kiss to his mouth.

"Welcome to Baltimore," Hannibal whispered against his cheek, smile wide.

The extra overcoat was for him. His initial urge to protest quieted at the eager expression on Hannibal's face; they were courting now, he reminded himself, it wasn't an extravagance for the man to buy him a coat.

Outside it's as cold as he'd feared, the chill bracing, scraping against his cheeks until they felt raw; without the overcoat, he would surely have frozen.

In the car, Will took in the strange ice-clad scenery, curious and in a strange mood. To his relief, the alpha wasn't one of those people who needed to fill up the quiet with chatter, instead he only spoke to point out landmarks. The alpha didn't ask about the killer apparently murdering male alphas in New Orleans (everyone would soon forget when yet another political scandal took to the airwaves), or if Will's father had been upset at the change in plans (Dave Graham had been suspicious but not upset, since he had poker nights with the boys and was hardly going to be forlorn for company – and besides, the kid often missed the holidays) and if tongues were wagging back home among the other residents of Laurie (most definitely; Will hoped the tongues wagged all the way to the station so everyone would shake their heads and claim they saw it coming; young unmarried omegas on the force never stayed long – some high-handed alpha always came and carried them off to make babies.)

The house was picturesque even on a street full of picturesque houses, with three-stories and a front portico complete with four columns, stalactites dripping down from the awnings. Having only moved in six-months ago after extensive renovations, Hannibal's proud of his abode. His favorite place was naturally the newly-fitted kitchen with its custom-made shelves, cupboards and benches, gas range stove fitted into a free-standing counter, and two multi-functional ovens mounted on the walls alongside a massive double-door fridge big enough to accommodate two cadavers.

Hannibal walked him through the expansive dining room with its just-budding herb garden built into the walls – a novel idea that the alpha got from an illustrative manuscript of some minor 17th Century Dutch lord who had built a similar feature in his study, considering himself something of a botanist – and a lounge room with a magnificent marble fireplace, no signs of holiday cheer anywhere except for a glass bowl on the mantle, filled to the brim with bright Christmas baubles.

"Murano glass," Will noted.

"Yes," the alpha beamed and fished out one of the exquisite glass balls to hold up in the light, "I bought them myself from the island's main workshop when I was in Venice for a long weekend."

Will looked around the half-empty room. There were two armchairs taking up the place in front the fireplace along with a thick Persian rug, and nothing else, not even a side table; several books were neatly piled at the foot of one armchair.

"My previous home was an apartment," Hannibal shot the bare corners a wry look, answering the unspoken question, "I'm sorry to say I've not finished furnishing the place – don't be surprised if you walk into an empty room."

You could finish it, we could complete this house together, the alpha's hand whispered as it skimmed his waist, directing him further down the corridor to a completely bare room with heavy oak double-doors and freshly-stripped walls that Hannibal intended to transform into a study; and finally, the door in a hidden corner that led to an empty basement – the perfect place for a butler's kitchen and extended pantry, maybe even a cellar.

Everything made him think of the alpha's long-dead family, and the cold desolate Christmases that Hannibal must have survived every year since leaving behind his aunt in

Paris; that the alpha had endured *this year's* Christmas alone, in this house far too big for one person, waiting for Will to arrive.

Hannibal looked to him, eyes soft, "All plans for another day."

One day, when there's children in this house, the alpha didn't say.

They go upstairs to the empty bedrooms – *guest* bedrooms, Hannibal called them, but that wasn't what they're for – and Will's shown to where he'll be sleeping.

The room had been fitted with basic but expensive furnishings; the bed linens were buttery smooth, there were four-posts for the bed frame, while the wardrobe and matching bureau were clearly antiques. Out the tall windows, Will saw a man in a hooded parka push a red snow blower across a driveway.

Will didn't dare put his damp and scuffed suitcase on the bed, instead dumping its contents on the bedspread before kicking the empty case under the bed like a dirty secret. He hung up his wrinkled Walmart shirts next to the crisp designer shirts bought in his size, clumsily bundled his frumpy sweaters and fleece vests next to the richly-dyed wool-silk pullovers already washed and folded into the bureau drawers. When he's done, he wondered why he'd even bothered; his clothes were an embarrassment next to what Hannibal had provided.

The last thing he put away was a small bottle with a smudged label, something secret, something he wasn't supposed to have; he hid it in the back of the underwear drawer, wrapping it tightly in a pair of black briefs.

Then he changed, taking a shower in the en suite bathroom, selecting a shirt tentatively from among his new clothes, pulling out a stone-blue sweater that would bring out his eyes. This was not an illusion, here in this house, straight across the country in cold wet Baltimore. He wasn't playing a game. This was the rest of his life, his freedom, his sanity. He was not a liar by habit, but in the past few months, he had lied and obfuscated and deceived more than he'd thought he would in a lifetime. And he was going to lie, obfuscate and deceive some more; don't forget the plan, he told himself, *don't forget*.

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31 December 2002

The New Year's Eve party was at the aquarium this year, and Will knew before they'd even stepped inside the front foyer doors that he'd be uncomfortable. There's a selection of twenty-five different canapés, Italian wine and French champagne, wait staff in smartly-pressed waistcoats of mauve on black. The hostess, an Eloise Komeda – a famous Boston novelist and socialite, Hannibal whispered in his ear, known for her award-winning historical fiction – swooped upon them almost immediately.

What a gorgeous young man, the beta in her forties purred at Will then quickly turned upon Hannibal to demand answers; was this where the alpha had disappeared to for the last few months, she wondered aloud, courting this lovely creature?

Hannibal's response was a bashful but clearly pleased smile.

Will didn't know if it was deliberate or not, but her attention seemed to be the signal for everyone else to turn upon them.

They want to know everything! How did they meet – injured stopping a mugging – *oh how exciting, that's delightful*; what did he do – homicide detective – *that must be tough for you, dear, how do you do it, dangerous job for an omega, is there many of you on the force*; did Will have any siblings who were still single – no, he's an only child – *oh that's a pity*; and most importantly, the one question everyone hinted at but didn't ask: was it serious?

Hannibal glanced at him, brown-eyes warm and brimming with something he didn't understand, before turning to the audience with a mischievous smile. "I don't wish to jinx myself."

The response drew a flutter of laughter among the gathered acquaintances.

"How long have you been here?" Mrs. Komeda asked once some of the crowd had dispersed, off to shake other hands and pat other backs, "Are you enjoying Baltimore?"

"Almost a week, but I'm afraid I took him to see *Idomeneo* in DC," Hannibal answered, glancing at him, "Rest assured, I shall make sure that he does."

Will wanted to mind but he didn't, as the woman's sharp eyes turned instead to the alpha for answers. He had been here six days, seven hours, and nineteen minutes.

That first night they'd enjoyed a simple two-course dinner – lamb chops with a red-beet gratin, roasted pickled grapes and sautéed Swiss chard, slivers of lemon cheesecake – then drove around Mount Vernon to look at the lights before retiring to a lazy evening in front of the fireplace, reminiscing on Christmases past over cognac and wine. That first Christmas in Paris, when Hannibal had braved the cold to go on evening walks through the streets, mesmerized by the lights; the Parisian trees dripping in gold and silver; the grand Christmas tree decked in every color, cast against the exquisite glass dome of Galeries Lafayette; flitting from tent to tent at the traditional markets beneath the ghost-lit Notre Dame cathedral, listening intently to his uncle chatting jovially with the passionate craftsmen selling their wares there. The one Christmas when Will was twelve, and he'd been invited to stay for the holidays by the mother of a fellow omega classmate in hopes of fattening him up. It's Florida, and so they'd served artichoke bisque, garlic and chilli lobster, *ceviche* and roasted duck salad.

The alpha said something else but he didn't catch it. Whatever it was, Mrs. Komeda gave an odd little giggle, the childish sound of it belying her age, waving them off with an order to enjoy the party.

He's not unaware of the dismayed side-glances and occasional mutter behind bejewelled hands. Every conversation was something to be carefully navigated, each response carefully considered, for it was remembered and reported and dissected after he was gone. Did you see who Doctor Lecter brought with him tonight, they were saying, where did the doctor find him? Some were kind, reserving their judgments; a select few confided that they were pleased to know the alpha wasn't lonely. Others saw him as an interloper, an anomaly; Hannibal Lecter came to these events alone.

Then there were the assholes who thought it was about time that Doctor Lecter settled down.

"You're fine," one particularly annoying alpha woman commented flippantly, "But being single is not on at his age."

Will drank champagne like it was water, trying to dull the assault of impressions that swirled around him like cigarette smoke until people were drunk enough to not notice him leaving for the bathroom and slipping out to the terrace instead.

There's a thin layer of white over the dark seawater; at the edges, it cracked and dissolved like the hard frosting on a cake that's been half-eaten and left to melt. The low-temperature however didn't seem to affect any of the celebrations: Inner Harbor was alive with color, lights, music and movement as people brushed against one another in the crush that was New Years Eve celebrations. It's the first time he's seen the harbor at night as he'd prefer to stay in to avoid the winter chill, enjoying Hannibal's exquisite dinners and washing up afterwards shoulder-to-shoulder, like he'd been doing this for months, years…

The weight of the cognitive dissonance that had tormented him back in New Orleans seemed to fade with each day he spent here, where no one knew him and he knew no one. He liked the anonymity, perhaps too much, and felt anxious at the thought of leaving when his stay was finished.

He glanced to the side, looking beyond the glass to the alpha entertaining his cadre of admirers. Despite never looking once in his direction, Will felt certain that Hannibal knew exactly where he was, and that he was looking at him. He watched the alpha jump the hurdles of social etiquette, paying just the right amount of attention to everyone who sought him out, smiling, laughing at jokes, making the right quips at the right times. He shifted in his newly-tailored tuxedo, Hannibal's gift for him. At some point in the last few days, they had graduated to holding hands, like a real couple. Inside his gloves, Will's hand had been hot and clammy, unfamiliar in their new leather covering.

Hannibal's eyes flicked to him and his smile grew knowing.

They were to stay for the midnight fireworks. Will found himself drifting back out to the balcony several times in the next two hours of socialization. When everyone finally joined him outside, he had already staked out a prime viewing spot. That's where Hannibal found him.

"You look cold," the alpha murmured into his ear as he curled an arm around Will's waist, but they have no time to talk as the crowd around them began to chant with the partiers on the promenade, counting down to midnight. He had ten more days…ten more days to do

what he had set out to do. Will turned and stared up into Hannibal Lecter's shadowed face, into the man's wide smile as he murmured *four*, *three, two*…

Closing his eyes, he leaned forward to kiss the man. It's long and sweet and cold; Hannibal's mouth tasted of champagne and chocolate and blood. Behind his eye lids, the world exploded in thunder and light.

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3 January 2003

There's sweat down his back, and he's panting with the heavy raspy desperation of excess exertion. Making out the shadows and shapes in the darkness pierced with shafts of murky moonlight, he found his eyes tracing a nose, an open soundless mouth. His hands were itchy, sticky and stiff with blood. The chest was open, the bed sheets wracked with black and iron. Someone turned on the lamps in the corners and wandered over to stand next to him, to look upon what he had created.

"You're beautiful," Hannibal murmured tenderly, "Look what you've done."

Will turned to him, sodden with sweat. The alpha's hands cupped his face with such gentleness, such sensuality. There's a beating heart in his right fist and suddenly, starving from all his work, he needed to eat it. Trying to be polite, he offered it up to the alpha. Hannibal's eyes curved like moon-crescents.

"No, Will, you should have the honor."

Warm salty iron filled his mouth, the walls of the heart tearing under the immense force of his closing jaw. The taste burst wetly over his tongue, like ripe fruit. Ecstasy and revulsion fought for his palate and his soul.

His eyes snapped open to darkness tempered with refracted moonlight.

The confusion of the bloody dream lifted quickly as he glanced around the second bedroom of Hannibal's hunting cabin. His heart rate slowed as he took in his blood-free hands, licked the back of his blood-free teeth. Running a clammy palm across his sweat-soaked forehead, Will turned onto his side to check the time on his cell phone. He grimaced; it's nearly five – too early to be awake but too late to fall asleep again. Rolling out of bed, he went to the window and orientated himself in the familiar pastoral sight washed in naked moonlight; wild fields of tall unattended grass greeted him, and thickets of trees hemmed in the property. He took a deep breath of the frigid air and unwound his tense muscles.

In the starkness of reality, the dream seemed fantastical, and utterly unreal, ridiculous even. Freud would be proud of him, Will smiled grimly. He knew what the dream signalled at – *heat*.

His delayed heat was finally here, without the need for medical intervention. The shock of a death close to you, the doctor had told him sympathetically three months ago. She had prescribed him a drug to kick-start the process, to save him the inconvenience of having the heat begin unexpectedly while he was in an awkward place. He hadn't taken the drugs, but had kept it just in case, though it seemed he hadn't needed to worry at all. It's not surprising. He had just spent over a week in the presence of an alpha, enjoying the security that came with that despite the fact they never did more than kiss and hold hands.

Will changed out of his nightshirt and pulled on a Henley, a pair of house pants and his fleece jacket, leaving the bedroom in search of tea. It's not long before Hannibal joined him, an self-professed light sleeper. Will stirred sugar into his mug and tried not to stare. The alpha smiled at him, drowsy and soft but suspiciously unrumpled for 5AM.

"Morning," Hannibal greeted, "couldn't sleep?"

He knew the moment the alpha caught the scent of him. A stiffening of the shoulders, a slight hint of movement towards him before Hannibal stopped himself.

He wanted to undress the man. He wanted to unbutton the many buttons of Hannibal's black sleeping shirt, pull it back to reveal that chest, one gleaming shoulder. He wanted to pull it off and toss it to the floor, pull at the cords of the man's pajama bottoms, snap the elastic against taunt skin and pull those dark cotton pants down. Would the alpha wear underwear? Boxers or briefs? Briefs, Will decided in a split second of thought. Or would he be naked? He would tug those pajamas down, inch by inch, until he saw the man's hipbones, his pubic bone. The entire thing would drop once he passed the alpha's thick athletic thighs, puddling forgotten on the floor. His first sight of Hannibal's naked body would on his knees, looking up at that body, confronted with a proud alpha cock. He would ignore its rude desire, pressing his mouth to a strong thigh and then trace his tongue along a hipbone, taste the sweetness of skin.

Will's eyes flicked from the alpha's hand to the alpha's chest and then back down to his mug. He wanted the alpha. It was the hormones, the rush of chemicals, but he still wanted. His world narrowed to the distance between them. A stranger that used to be him tried to deter him but even before he had flown half way across the country, he had made up his mind.

He met the alpha's eyes. Hannibal asked him something.

Will put down his hot mug of tea and leaned forward, burrowing his nose and mouth into the pungent furrows of the man's collarbone, breathed in the smell of an alpha in his prime.

Sex, it was just sex. The propagation of the species. Will had furtively read the books in the library as a teen upon the first flutters of heat-arousal, shaken by the predictions of what he had to look forward to, and used to lie in bed on those hot Florida nights, trying to imagine him taking a knot and liking it and feeling strange afterwards.

At fifteen, he had to bite his pillow in the dark and silent house, doors locked as he worked his hand between his legs, muffling all his shameless cries and screams until the skin of his throat cracked. He would work his flesh until his hands were too tired, and almost hourly during those few days each year, he would have a hand inside his underwear, thin hips thrusting into his fist even as his bottom ground against the scratchy bed-sheets, desperate for

relief he couldn't get. The pain from heat would be so severe he'd sweat profusely, his hands would shake, and he'd be dizzy if he stood up for too long.

It was like being stricken with a disease everyone made light of. The only cure would be marriage, an omega health counsellor advised him, your heats would calm after the first child.

His initial attempts at sex had been awkward and futile. The beta men he'd bedded never seemed to be able to breach him properly, confused by the defensive structure of his hidden other-genitalia. After that he stuck to beta women who were sweet and self-assured. He had avoided alphas, male or female, no matter how old or young they were, afraid of being triggered. He felt dizzy and dangerous in their presence, no matter what season. Hannibal knew about the emptiness that drove Will to join the police force despite the other offers, he knew about how Will never smiled too much or gave more than a precise amount of attention to any alphas, how he fought to never give anyone the satisfaction of having tricked him – he might be omega but he *would not* be taken advantage of, he *was not* prey. Hannibal knew him, and would not make a meal of him.

Disparate sensations pressed upon his awareness; the flat of their stomachs pressed together, a single thin layer of cotton between them; the wiry hairs of the alpha's chest under his right hand (he wanted to pull, rip, see Hannibal's face freeze in pain – he'd startled but not for long, then he'd smirk and make some horrid innuendo joke because the alpha secretly thought he was a comedian), the fingers of his left hand tangling up in the alpha's hair; the warmth of Hannibal's mouth; Hannibal's dry warm skin.

He didn't know how they had ended up on the alpha's bed and he didn't care.

In the fever of his heat, he forgot his plan, forgot that he was seducing the alpha and allowed himself to be fall into what seemed to be so natural. Felt Hannibal's hands press him into the bed, heard his voice tell him to stay there – he stayed, fists full of buttery cotton – felt his thighs opened, lifted up, the heat of a heavy stare. As a trained doctor, the alpha knew where to touch him, knew where to worm his finger so that he could stroke open that hidden place; a wet sheath of muscle just adjacent to his anal cavity that would pleasure an alpha with hot, wet contractions; the flexible swirl of protective outer muscle that would lock down a knot, stretch comfortably to accommodate whatever size it would swell to; heighten the alpha's pleasure; lessen the omega's suffering; aid the breeding process.

His cock bobbed in response to his fragmented thoughts, hot with pleasure.

Hannibal entered him and grunted, eyes shut against the flood of sensation, an animal sound. They were animals in this moment, locked together in sexual intercourse. Will threw his head back with half-sigh, half-moan, eyes closing as he surrendered into the warmth flooding him. He could feel those virgin muscles parting, straining, slicking to ease the way. He couldn't bear it, the dark senselessness of it pulsing hot between his thighs, his quietly desperate little moans, the pressure against him, the weight, the smell of musky aroused alpha; Hannibal's lack of clumsy fumbling, his mastery of manipulating flesh excited him. The alpha's touch burned with passion and lingered with affection; even in the midst of their shared frenzy, the man's civility reined him in, made his hands skim rather than grab, made him care, adjust the angle of his thrusts.

Will was losing his footing. He was already lost. He took Hannibal's hand from his hair and kissed the palm, tasted flesh and sweat with his tongue.

He submitted wordlessly, taking Hannibal into the most private and untouched parts of his body, his hands clumsily gripping and loosening over the alpha's shoulders, their bodies shivering together in the darkness of the curtained bedroom, his teeth pressing grooves into salty, meaty flesh.

He wanted a child. He longed for a baby in the crook of his arm.

Hannibal could be the instrument of his cure.

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7 January 2003

His heat lasted for almost four days, finally ebbing on a chilly Tuesday morning. His eyes opened slowly to stare up at the ceiling, empty of thoughts, certain that he had ruined everything despite the fact that he had intended to seduce Hannibal all along. His lips were tender, as well his thighs, a vague discomfort between his legs from the wounds of constant friction. They had made love any way they could, every way they could. When he couldn't take any more, too raw, too dry, they had turned to anal stimulation, to fellatio, to tugging each other as their mouths melded. His body felt heavy, his muscles weak from overuse. His neck still felt the phantom sensation of being cradled. He had discovered that Hannibal was a hair-puller and growled when someone sank their hands into the alpha's chest hair with the intention of marring him, and truly, terribly, whole-hearted was in love with Will.

It's what he wanted, but he had forgotten how vulnerable he would feel, how out of control, clinging onto the alpha as he allowed himself to be knotted, as he cried out from it, as his body stretched and squeezed around the alpha's cock and throbbed with each lick of wetness, trying to create life.

Before he had a chance to drown in self-doubt, the door opened, revealing Hannibal and a loaded tray. Will swallowed thickly as his stomach tightened in anticipation, his body reacting on instinct to this familiar scent. He pressed his knees together, arousal pinching the tip of his cock.

"Good morning," the alpha greeted.

"Hey," Will rasped, his voice confusing him with its roughness. He cleared his throat and sat up gingerly, adjusting his pillow against the bed head.

Placing the tray on the bedside, Hannibal sat to examine him, peering at his eyes. He put a careful hand on Will's forehead. "How do you feel?"

Like he had gone three whirls in the tumble dryer. Will nodded, “Yeah, ah, better, um, thanks.”

“Good,” the alpha smiled, “I thought we might have breakfast in bed.”

Will smiled back weakly and took the offered juice. It’s freshly-squeezed oranges and perfectly sweet. There’s an omelette and homemade sausages on each of their plates. They enjoyed the food in silence, peering at each other as the silent questions and flowcharts of answers floated between them like unfurling fronds of ferns in the sunlight.

“There’s something that I must ask you–”

“It’s fine,” Will said quickly, a half-lie. He wasn’t sure if he was fine with it anymore, but it was entirely too late for second-guesses.

Hannibal smiled, bemused by the omega’s snappish discomfort over something as banal as birth control. “That wasn’t what I was going to ask you,” he said gently, then with little ceremony, simply took the item in question out of his breast pocket.

Will stared at the ring, dumbfounded by its appearance.

His stomach dropped as he tentatively received it from the alpha’s grasp and exhaled a long shaky breath at the weight of it. He could tell it was old by the delicacy of its metalwork; nothing made today would be half so fine. It was probably an heirloom, he realized as he stared into the brilliant yellow diamond set within a gold bouquet of fronds, curls and arches. The alpha had planned this, possibly even before Will arrived in Baltimore; someone had had the priceless ring polished.

“It’s not your style, I know.” Hannibal said with a dry smile.

“No,” he breathed in, almost dizzy, “It’s–”

“Not your style,” the alpha repeated, his smile holding firm.

When Will looked to him, he found the alpha’s eyes focused on the ring, a nostalgic tenderness in that warm gaze. “It belonged to my great-grandfather; he was the son of a Bohemian countess, and became the mate of my forefather Hannibal V. The diamond came with him, as his siblings were all betas and barred from inheriting from their mother’s line. There had been a painting of him, I used to walk past it as a child. It’s all gone now, except for this and a few other trifles.”

He listened raptly, his initial shock forgotten as his mind avidly absorbed Hannibal’s words; he could almost see it as if he were there, peering at the little boy that was Hannibal following after his namesake down the long dreary hallways, being lifted up in his father’s arms to be told the story for the first time, being allowed to lean in and stare at the paint dabs and dust that made up the portrait of his forebearer.

Will stared at the ring.

This was what he had wanted – a reason to leave New Orleans that no one would suspect. But he found himself unable to speak as Hannibal's words died off and silence swooped in. He's been silent too long, he knew, but he felt as if there was a stone lodged in his esophagus somewhere. Perhaps sensing his mental disarray at being confronted with such a life-changing moment, the alpha took his hand and firmly slid the ring on.

"I can't," he heard himself saying as if from a long way off, jerking from the touch, "I mean…"

He didn't want to refuse. He wanted to say yes. He tried to say it, but panic choked the words from him.

"It's too soon," he ended up saying. It's lame. Will knew it was, but the fear that hit him at the very notion of saying yes made it impossible to think. Marriage suddenly seemed frightening, as it moved from a far-off concept to something real, living.

"I mean," he stammered, "You're still getting to know me."

The alpha seemed entranced with the sight of the ornate ring being worn.

"Hannibal," he mumbled, almost shame-faced, "I'm not sure I'm ready yet."

The older man turned his attention to him and gave him a small but warm smile, "I understand."

Will took a deep silent breath, relieved as he searched Hannibal's eyes and found no hidden resentment, no anger, just the truth; there was a little wistfulness, a touch of disappointment, but the alpha's feelings and intentions were unchanged. Nodding, he tried to give back the ring but Hannibal stopped him, hands folding over his fingers.

"No, Will, no," the alpha murmured, "My mind is not easily changed."

This was a promise…

Will peered at the older man, trying to hide his confusion. Hannibal beamed back, and raised the hands caught in his grasp. He kissed the knuckles before sitting back to admire the ring pulling down on the omega's finger.

"It's really beautiful," he said awkwardly.

Hannibal gave him a tender smile, "It's a different kind of beauty."

Chapter End Notes

Much thanks to everyone for comments and kudos, and to Eclectic who did a final read through and helped fix up the messy opening conversation, and to Kyuu, who emailed

me awesome little tidbits of her thoughts about stuff like Irene and nature vs. nurture in a family of serial killers and wedding venues in Baltimore (for another chapter)

संचित कर्म

Chapter Summary

> The rhythm and pleasures of family life and fatherhood, edged by the encroachment of Will's past

Chapter Notes

> Title - sanchita karma, the accumulated consequences of all past lives.
> Please enjoy :) domestic fluff and foreshadowing, no beta
> Also I post and then edit - so as you're reading if you come across an inconsistency, refresh and see if it's been altered.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “Every knife in the kitchen is different; some can be used in similar ways, and everyone will have their preferences.”
>
> The alpha laid out six different kitchen knives on the stainless steel bench and placed his hands on his firstborn’s slender shoulders. The boy, just on the verge of puberty, looked to his Pater with the wide-eyed trust and naked curiosity of childhood. Will watched them from the butler’s kitchen stairs, his mouth pursed in a faint smile and something like trepidation in the pit of his stomach. They had been down here for awhile, and were so occupied that they hadn’t even noticed him sneaking down the stairs. Soft tremors of Bach drifted down from the wall-mounted speakers.
>
> “This is called a Granton edge,” Hannibal picked up a long slender knife with a blunted tip, “Look at the hollows.”
>
> Tomas lean in and followed his Papa’s thumb which slid dangerously close the edge of the blade.
>
> “Most suitable for cutting meat, and anything which you don’t wish to shred, many types of knives can carry this edge. However this particular knife is for meat.”
>
> The alpha handed the knife hilt-first to the twelve-year old, who took it gingerly.
>
> “The row of scallops allow small pockets of air between the meat and the blade, allows one to slice thin delicate portions. Meanwhile, this one…” Hannibal picked up another knife, long

and slender with a very sharp point. Tomas' hazel eyes tracked the silvery blade, an avid student.

"This is also a carving knife but the edge is straight – you'll notice that this blade is thinner than the others," the alpha held the blade up horizontally, spine-first to Tomas' eye line, "If you don't have a slicing knife and you have some meat to slice, always go with a thinner blade for a more precise cut."

"Is it only for cooked meat?"

Hannibal graced the boy with a fond smile, "This one is – except for certain dishes, rarely will you need thinly-sliced raw meat. Do you remember what I used on our last hunting trip?"

Tomas tilted his head in thought, "The one that's curved up, right?"

"Yes. And do you remember what type of knife it was?"

"A boning knife," the boy replied almost immediately.

Hannibal beamed in approval. Will smiled to himself, watching as their child quietly basked Papa's warm attention.

"When you're older, I'll teach you how to butcher a carcass, but for now, I believe…." The alpha turned to the collection laid out on the counter top, deliberating, before picking out one of the smaller blades, holding it up for a cursory examination before he held it out for his son, hilt-first; "This one – resin handle, a good grip, fairly light, and you'll be pleased to know, very easy to clean."

Tomas took the blade and raised it for inspection, a strip of reflected light slashed across his cheek.

"Hello Will," Agent Jack Crawford smiled from beneath the brim of his felt hat, turning around from his casual survey of the street. There's a familiar cello case at the man's feet, and a paper package of bright yellow paper tucked under the man's arm. The deep mauve of his shirt leaped out at Will from behind the aqua and taupe crisscross of his tie. Half Windsor, the omega noted – respectable but not too formal.

He glanced behind the man, half-expecting company but there's no one else.

"You just missed Hannibal," he said, squinting against the pale morning sunlight.

"I know."

Right.

Will frowned and wondered if he should be on his guard but Jack Crawford smiled faintly, a small thing that flickered and sputtered to life in increments; this wasn't suspicion, this was an olive-branch.

"I was going to be in the neighborhood, and this just got released yesterday so…" the FBI agent began, lifting the case holding Tomas' precious new instrument. Will carefully set it aside, knowing that it would make his son's day if not week. For this, the alpha received a grateful smile.

They both looked down when there's the familiar clap of tiny feet rushing towards the front door; right on cue, Junior peeked out from behind Daddy's leg at the stranger, clutching at the material of Will's pants.

"Oh hey there buddy," Jack Crawford chuckled and bent to greet the infant, holding out the paper package and shaking it when the toddler warily eyed it, "Hope you don't mind. Bella saw it months ago and…" the alpha shook it again, smile petering off at the child's continued stand-off, "Well, it's a little something."

There's an echo of pain in the space between them, the paralysing breathlessness of anticipating the worst, the icy dread of loss to come; Hannibal's tender gaze across the man's office as Will walked in after the encounter with Budge surfaced in his mind, bobbing over the currents of his thoughts. Will took a breath, assaulted by compassion for a woman he had never met before.

The alpha's smile turned wistful, "She wanted the little guy to have it."

With a glance up at Daddy for permission – Will nodded and gently nudged Junior to go ahead – the little boy took the mystery package, his initial wariness at the strange visitor growing into gleeful excitement as he realized it was a present delivery. He hugged the bundle to him like a cuddly toy then retreated to the safety of Will's shadow to pick at it for clues. Crawford watched the child's antics with an absent smile, his thoughts obviously somewhere else.

"Would you like some coffee?" Will offered, stepping back to pick up the toddler. Junior didn't protest the cuddle, his childish hands not quite able to handle the delicate movements needed to undo the twine tied around his present.

"Please," Jack Crawford took off his hat and came inside.

He seemed almost surprised when Will pointed him to hang his coat and took no offense at the abrupt manner that he was instructed or that the omega left immediately for the kitchen. He followed quietly – a feat considering his unsubtle physical bulk – much like Ed Moses had, stepping cautiously over the kitchen threshold, hat in hand. Instead of affable ease though there was a cautiousness to Jack Crawford's demeanor; the man glanced about the room, his eyes roaming to take everything in while his jaw moved, a phantom clenching. Like it was his first time – which they both knew it wasn't – or like this was crime scene. Perhaps he didn't mean to but it's hard not to tense at the inexplicable undercurrents that stirred in the agent's wake.

“Something I can help you with?”

To his credit, Jack Crawford broke into smile, chagrin at being caught casing the place. Will imagined Hannibal being there in the room with them, the charm that the alpha would call upon to lighten the mood; *are you planning a robbery, Jack, or do you have something to say about my interior design?*

“Been awhile.”

“Surely it hasn’t been that long.”

“It’s been long enough,” the older man replied, pausing to peer at one of the pictures on the wall; delicate sketches of various moths in the one species – *Acherontia atropos*, the scrawled calligraphy in Hannibal’s penmanship declared. It seemed to take effort for Crawford to draw his eyes away.

“You know the first time I ever came over, Hannibal served me pork loin with a red Cumberland sauce,” the man grinned, revealing a gap in his front teeth, “I don’t get many opportunities to eat home-cooked meals so needless to say, I was pretty impressed.”

Will smiled briefly before focusing on preparing their coffees, not certain how one reacted when expected to reminisce over events he had no memory of. It’s the work of a few minutes to also heat up some of the leftover pastries – he ignored Crawford’s protests – it’s the polite thing to do, it’s what Hannibal would do, especially since he suspected the man probably hadn’t eaten.

“Unless one’s relationship with food is vastly damaged, food is a source of comfort; we eat and we are nourished, not just physically but mentally and emotionally,” Hannibal smiled at him from over the plates he was dressing – pork belly cut through with a piece of caramelized prosciutto that stuck out like a volcano eruption, garnished with a bright lime-green salad – Will secretly thought looked like a blood erupting from a wound, frozen in a moment. “If I can helped it, I always serve food to visitors, helps set the mood,” the alpha confided with a sly twinkle in his eyes, “Hopefully in my favor.”

Will shot the man an amused glance and took another sip of wine, “Don’t give away all your tricks, doctor.”

By the time they’re moving onto the dining room, Junior had given up on being civilized and was fully-focused on destroying the paper wrapping keeping him from his present.

“How is she?”

The man glanced at him with a tired smile as he sat but didn’t say anything.

Will glanced down into his cup – she didn’t have long, he read from the pinch of the man’s eyes, the tremor of Crawford’s smile. Both of them look over when there’s a terrific rip as

Junior flung the package into the air, tearing the bundle clear in two. There's a moment's confusion over the crumbled piece of clothing on the floor before Junior daintily picked it up. Will chuckled as he leaned down to collect the discarded wrapping lest the dogs get their teeth into it, running a hand through the toddler's hair.

"What have you got there?" He asked, and laughed softly when Hannibal Junior draped the item over Daddy's closest knee with a flourish, clearly picked up from many hours of watching and imitating his namesake. The child had lost interest in his gift the second he saw that it couldn't be cuddled or eaten, and in accordance with his discontent, wandered off to the corner where a box of his toys was kept. Will straightened the gift; it was a small hooded-jacket, caramel with darker-toned puppy ears flopping down from the side of the hood. He smiled wryly, already certain that Hannibal would absolutely hate it and just as sure that his husband would secretly think it was pretty darn adorable.

"Thank you."

The alpha smiled, "I'll pass on your appreciation to Bella."

For a minute, they drank their coffees. After being offered the pastries, the FBI agent ate one followed quickly by another, making appreciative noises that had the dogs licking their chops in agreements outside the glass doors.

"So this is what you do now," Jack Crawford smiled as he watched the omega let the dogs inside so they could sniff at the visitor instead of baying mournfully and helped the toddler drink a sip from a glass of milk leftover from breakfast.

At Will's stare, the alpha hastened to add, "It's nice, I'd pick it over what I had you doing."

Will smiled without meaning it and took a shallow sip of his coffee, using it as a chance to study the FBI agent. He vaguely wondered if the man had entered into his acquaintance already suspicious and engineered his friendship with Hannibal for the sake of pursuing him, 'the Butcher' – or if it had been all him. Even with the certainty of exoneration, to allow himself to be incarcerated all for the sake of getting one up on the FBI, seemed unusually risky; it was far more likely that someone had gotten too close, and he'd resorted to extreme measures. *Best defence is a good offense*, and all that…

"You look good," the man said suddenly, something akin to regret in his smile.

The omega shifted uncomfortably. Was this a social call, he wondered as he took a sip – did they do social calls anymore? His aversion to the alpha from the last few times they had met was no longer present, replaced by something hesitant and shifting; getting Crawford to consider him a confidant again could be strategic – keep your friends close et cetera – but if the man was prone to suspicion, then Will couldn't count upon willful blindness to save him from scrutiny.

Jack Crawford put down his coffee. "I heard you've been looking into some cold case files."

He didn't snort at the obvious fishing attempt but it's a close thing. "Research, nothing important."

By the careful look on the alpha's face, he begged to differ; "Anything spring up at you?"

Will rubbed the back of his neck, not sure how much he should reveal.

"I dug up some new information. Beverly told me she forwarded them on last week," the older man waited a beat, before asking, "Have you had a chance to look through my email?"

He supposed he had been expecting this; he'd requested several cold case files and Beverly *had* suggested that he speak to Crawford, who was working on a similar project. He hadn't – as their research into unsolved serial murders were informed by vastly conflicting agendas – but knew that the FBI grapevine would ensure that the alpha would find out either way.

"Seven victims," Will reached down to scratch Winston on the head when the dog came to him, looking for affection, "I thought you said it was five."

"The local PD in Chicago and DC were behind on entering cases into VICAP back in 2003 so New Orleans never knew about those homicides when they contacted the BAU. I only found the connections myself a few weeks ago."

"So it's confirmed."

"I don't know," The man shrugged, smile self-deprecating, "I'm hoping you could have a look at it, give me your thoughts."

Will nodded slowly and took a measured sip of his coffee, careful not to appear too interested. *Someone* had killed Mike Chaplain and it hadn't been his alter-ego. Was this the first appearance of his co-conspirator? Crawford took out a folded manila envelope from his inner pocket and slid it across the table. In the background, Junior let loose a peel of delighted laughter at Nap, who despite his advanced age still liked to run circles around children. Will took the envelope.

"I'll look at it but no guarantees."

The agent nodded and reached for his coffee, "That's all I can ask. You're the best we have."

"You could have brought this to Heimlich," Will took out the documents; they appeared to be case write-ups from the police officers who had been originally charged with the cases, evidence itineraries and the autopsy reports – no photos, he noted, but there was a sheet with details of which database he could use to access those, "or Alana; that's what they're paid for."

"I could have, but we both know that you have a specific way of thinking about things; I wanted to borrow your insight."

The compliment was sincere. He met the agent's solemn gaze, the expression at odds with Crawford's genial smile. "It's not a science, I just get lucky."

"Well," Crawford chuckled, with tone of voice that said they were going to have to agree to disagree, "You've had a lot of luck."

Was this what drew the agent to become suspicious of Will in the first place? They must both be thinking of the same thing because there's a stilted silence before the moment was broken by Junior wriggling under Will's arm and flinging himself upon his father's lap like a overly touch-starved feline. He hoisted the infant up into his arms. Junior huddled against him and cast a cool look across the table to the visitor as he reached for his glass of milk. Whatever else Jack Crawford had intended to bring up was lost as the alpha stared at the child, his smile bittersweet; Bella Crawford was an alpha, like her husband, and the couple had no children – when she passed, the man would be alone. Will's thoughts drifted to his father, alone in his ramshackle cottage by the water, doing daily walks with the dogs, fishing when he felt like it, Thursday night poker games and Monday nights in town for beer with the boys, pecking away at the keyboard at the local library (despite being told several times he could get the internet out at his place) with his reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose so that he could tell Will that Elizabeta was growing up very pretty (Dave Graham didn't write that she's growing up to be as pretty as her Daddy, as others might) and when could they visit him (Will had demurred, uncertain where they stood).

"Moses wants you fulltime."

He steadied the glass as the child drank, "I'm not sure that's possible."

The alpha smiled faintly, before giving him a nod of affirmation. There's a beep from Jack Crawford's phone and he excused himself to make a call. When he came back a minute later, he didn't sit back down. "I'm afraid I've got to run; the FBI just got several reports that Abel Gideon is in Minnesota, and it's too much of coincidence to write off."

Will didn't raise an eyebrow but he did tense at the familiar reference. He knew that the ex-surgeon had disappeared seemingly into thin air after he'd had his merry way with Chilton, but had no idea that the FBI were still actively pursuing him. He supposed after Freddie Lounds had made such a big deal about the possibility that Gideon was the Chesapeake Ripper, the Bureau had to act; to have ignored it would have been incited public disapproval and well – Will hid a snort – one couldn't have that. Jack Crawford looked to him and pursed his mouth, looking on the verge of a question before he noticeably seemed to reconsider.

"Thanks for the hospitality, Will."

Sliding Junior off him, he saw the man to the door.

"I'd like to bring Junior and Micah to visit Bella next week, thank her for the gift."

The smile Crawford flashed him was a dash of surprised underscored by confusion and relief, followed swiftly by gladness and gratitude; and Will knew it was the right decision, even if he ended up hating the woman.

"She'd like that," he told Will with a warm smile, "Just call when you're coming over. I'll let the nurse know to let you in."

They nodded with the respectful distance of acquaintances and the man turned to leave. Jack Crawford only managed three steps before he came to an abrupt stop and spun on his heel,

the lines of his face deepening with his frown. “Will, if there’s something, anything, going on, you know you can tell me, right?”

He eyed the man for a long moment then nodded, locking away his apprehension.

Through the noise cancelling headphones, Will heard the sound of hammering from somewhere in the basement room. It was a hollow sound, like wet laundry left to flap in violent winds. Behind his closed eyes, he noted the musty smell of the place, the zing of gun powder residue, the lingering mint from his chewing gum, the weight between his hands, the ghost of his shadow’s breath against his neck, whispering to him. Raising his gun at the target, his eyes snapped open, pupils dilating as he pulled the trigger once, twice, three times, like the countdown of a song. Each bullet exited with extreme force, the frame of his shoulders and hips pitted against its kickback.

He watched the twelve-year old, transfixed by the animated smile as he talked about family holidays and the upcoming visit to Switzerland. “I’m trying to convince papa to go to France instead of Italy,” the child said, with the full conviction that his say was going to counted in his Papa’s decision, then more quietly, told Will that they’d been to Paris once to spend Christmas there.

“It was beautiful,” Tomas smiled down at the collection of photos, saddened by the reminder that his omega-parent thought him a stranger, “but I’ve never been there in summer.”

Despite being only twelve, Tomas had been to Europe twice, once to the Indian Ocean - Seychelles specifically – and once to South America. He loved travelling and wanted to go to Japan soon, because Papa had been there as a young man and told him so many amazing stories. He loved Paris during Christmas when the fairy lights were out and all the department stores had displays, but more desperately wanted to visit Versailles – he’d picked up a cold last time and couldn’t go; he wanted to go visit all the big castles in Germany; and his favorite dish was this truffle pasta, which he first had at Le Bernadin *in New York for his birthday when he was eight – when they couldn’t visit New York, Papa would take him to Charleston or make him his favorites.*

“Papa’s teaching me to cook,” the twelve-year old confided with a small pleased smile, “I’m trying to make soufflé at the moment – I hope that I’ll get it right by the end of the year because I told Papa I’d make it for his birthday.”

Will didn’t need to hear more to know that Tomas had been brought up so differently to himself that they might as well have been from different time periods. While he had always been seen as too introverted, too different, unfriendly, too fussy, Tomas had the delighted approval of a Pater who adored his firstborn’s quiet sensibilities and encouraged his interests in the finer arts, would read to him patiently and explain the big words and took him to the

art gallery, the symphony, the theatre. Unlike Will, there had been no push for Tomas to get out and play like other children; it was fine to stay inside with Daddy and read, to draw and listen to Bach with Papa, to enjoy his own solitary company; the boy was a peculiar sort of omega, and that was just fine with Papa.

Hannibal lavished praise and physical affection on all the children, but he made an extra effort to dote upon his sensitive little omega boy, careful to build the boy's self-esteem and dreading the chance Tomas might be misled by any cads who seeing his son's good-looks would think him 'prey' – no, his little boy would know he was special, entitled to a proper alpha suitor with the breeding to keep up with his little darling's finely-honed intellect, someone able to keep Tomas in the lifestyle he was accustomed to and treat him with the respect he was owed. And Tomas believed his Papa, believed that a worthy suitor would be like his Pater – a respectably employed, open-minded and well-mannered alpha.

It's not insidious but it was certainly manipulative.

Will found that he approved, even if he felt faint at the idea of Tomas dating anyone.

He stepped to the side and frowned at his hits, then raised his gun again, trying to find his footing. In the back of his mind, the fortnight flitted through his head like a merry-go-round of snapshots swirling down a sinkhole; an alpha woman lying in her bed, chest-bared and emptied of its heart; the trip to the aquarium, Micah opening his mouth as wide as he could at the fishes, Junior utterly bewitched by the floating creatures; the corpse of a beta male bisected, each half facing the other, one stiff grey hand posed over an empty tumbler, the other hand splayed over a book, melting slowly; the look that passed between Hannibal and him as the toddler tried to back away from his birthday cake like it was something to be feared until Eli leaned in to blow out the candles, then it was tears of utter devastation because the cake was *his* and how dare his sister blow out *his* candles – and he was *only* sharing his cake with Daddy and Papa and *maybe* Tomas; grocery runs interspersed with kisses goodbye, music rehearsals and Eli's joyous laugh as Papa swung her around and around in the park, her blue dress cresting like a wave in the weak sunshine.

(His specter tutted at him from the corner of his eyes; he knew what the omega was doing. He was retreating as deeply into the skin of Doctor Hannibal Lecter's mate as he could. It wouldn't change anything; he was what he was…)

Will finished the rest of his session, then packed up. Exiting the basement of the local FBI field offices was almost a shock as the dim interiors gave way to the brightness of midday. He secured the weapon in its case in his trunk, then got in and drove home.

Hannibal Junior and Micah pounced as soon as he entered with overflowing enthusiasm, as though their separation with Daddy had been months rather than just hours. Will picked up the youngest with a chuckle and nuzzled the toddler, eliciting a giggle. He told Micah to go get the leashes.

Walking the dogs took a good part of the afternoon. Junior returned home covered in grass stains and ran to the lounge where the big cushions were to drag one onto the floor so he

could lie on his back his legs up over his head like a yoga contortionist, content to play by himself. His brother wiped miserably at his teary eyes, heartbroken from a swing disembarkation gone wrong.

Marie crouched down and rubbed the four-year old's arms in sympathy, "What's happened, *mon petit chou*?"

Micah sobbed, shoulders heaving as he hiccupped out the whole horrid tale of how Daddy called him to leave and he was going to jump athletically off the swing but instead tripped over Nap's leash and tumbled face-first into the playground.

"And *look*," the child pointed, tilting back so the elderly beta could see his skinned chin.

Will opened his arms with a murmur of bemused sympathy as the loud sobs started up again; the child launched himself at Daddy with desperate sadness. The omega pressed his lips to the little blond head and rocked side to side, listened to the hiccups, the shuddering gasps, the wails of his third-born. It's terrible, the feeling that overcame him, an attachment that seemed intensely beyond even the lauded devotion of omegas to his or her offspring. It stayed with him, the feeling, a tenderness that shifted at a moment's notice to fierce protectiveness.

There were photos of him on the iPad. Entire collections. Years worth. Him in a soft jacket and casual shirt, longer hair tucked behind his ears and a distracted smile on his face, his head almost touching the temple of a much-younger Tomas, the infant's cheeks plump and pink from sun, basking in the Spanish sunshine as they walked along the bright streets of Barcelona or peered out from the terraces of Granada. Photos of them in Paris for Christmas, photos of Micah as a baby looking very bewildered at the camera, a montage of toothless grins and frog-eyed tears. Photos of him and Hannibal, him and the children, photos of him wide-eyed and delighted helping a very chubby Elizabeta walk while she stared up at him with childish adoration; Junior asleep in a dozing Hannibal's arms.

Tomas smiled shyly, and showed him the scrapbook he had kept, with all the little pamphlets tucked in between the pages; basilica guides, suggested museum itineraries, crumpled maps and dog-eared postcards. "We went and saw the church where Michelangelo was buried."

They had gone to Florence as a family when Tomas had been only seven, a side trip from their dream-like Christmas in Paris. With a memory recall that rivalled the omega's own childhood recollections, the boy described the bridges they had walked across, the bell tower that he had climbed with Papa while Daddy stood below with a grumpy Eli in the cold winter winds, the soaring ceilings of Il Duomo di Firenze*. There's a picture of them, Pater and omega child, standing together – Tomas nestling back against Hannibal's warmth, the stags and icicles printed on his robin's egg blue coat half-hidden by the flap of Papa's coat he'd draped over one shoulder, his chin dipped down as he smiled, shy but bursting with happiness. The alpha smiled back at Will from the slick iPad screen with the serenity of someone who had everything he wanted in front of him.*

“This morning as I was leaving the house, you received a phone call,” his husband commented as they washed up the more delicate items used for dinner. Will finished drying the drinking goblet in his hand, glancing now and then at the toddler babbling at his set of soft toys, all lined up in a row on the corner armchair. Micah was sitting on a futon on the kitchen floor and drawing with his tongue stuck out the side of his mouth, the thick pad of papers almost bent in half on his knees.

“Alana called.”

There was the muffled pop of the sink plug being pulled and water draining in the sink. Hannibal shot him a curious look but didn’t ask.

“She wanted to know how I was doing,” the omega volunteered with a drawn-out sigh.

Alana also wanted to visit him with Doctors Vaughn and Lynch, so they could interview him and properly determine what exactly happened that caused him to have such a dramatic recovery of memories, and why was it so finite, so specific (that’s how he had organized it; cause and effect set up like levers and counterweights, just waiting for the right combination.)

Random things like a turn of phrase, a smell, a dish, even a building he would pass, seemed to trigger the slippery slopes of his mind, causing spills that turned inevitably into tsunamis. Sometimes it was the sight of a high-class Thai restaurant where a Chinese restaurant had once been (Hannibal had taken him there once, and had been unimpressed), a building that used to be on a street corner gone and replaced with a sparkling doctor’s surgery, a casual caress across the planes of his stomach, half-asleep in bed teasing loose memories of the alpha, younger and slimmer, looking down on the swell of Will’s belly with tender satisfaction, dry hands measuring the curve of it, cupping the underside to feel the hefty evidence of his own virility…

Will suppressed a shiver.

Hannibal shifted to face him, “And how are you feeling?”

“Tired,” he said, then more reluctantly as he glanced down at the last goblet he was drying, in a voice that was quiet enough to be a breath, “Anxious.”

He allowed himself to be pulled against the alpha’s side, breathing in slowly as he took in the scent of Hannibal and was gentled with a soft touch on his nape. Will closed his eyes.

The Chesapeake Ripper had struck twice more after Budge. Going to the crime scenes had not yielded anything else than what he already knew, of the Ripper or their connection to each other. Will hadn’t volunteered to do more on the Ripper case than what he was already doing – which he insisted on still being within the boundaries of academic study. He’d like to think that Moses was respecting his wishes to distance himself from the Bureau, but it was probably far more likely that Sanchez feared reprisals from Hannibal’s lawyers.

Agent Moses had been philosophical about losing another chance to catch the Ripper but Will had seen the look in Jack Crawford’s eyes as he stood there, arms folded across his chest and

stared down at the sectionalized corpses. The man had been angered – furious even – but on its heels was a choked despair, the look of someone trapped.

Jack believes that you know who the Butcher is and wants your help to catch him…

Lost in thought, he only realized that Hannibal was speaking to him when the alpha squeezed his shoulder.

“Sorry I missed that.”

“You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“My father asked to visit.”

Actually his father wanted him to visit with the kids, but Will knew that was unlikely to happen since school was still on and his deadline for returning to Quantico loomed with the coming of spring break. He also had an inkling that while Hannibal would be more than happy to fly the entire family down for a long weekend, his father didn’t exactly want to see the alpha. Things were not chilly between them, but he’d read between the lines enough to know that the relationship between son-in-law and father-in-law remained stilted even after thirteen years.

“I’m thinking of inviting him up while you’re away for the conference in Chicago,” he said all in one breath as he pulled away to begin wiping down the counters. There was a draw-out silence and Will didn’t need to look over to know that the alpha was curious about the timing of the request.

“He’s getting older and,” he gave a desultory shrug, unable to quite call up any shored filial piety except splashes of gratitude and the welling resentment of a child abandoned metaphorically if not physically, “who knows what will happen.”

“You don’t need my permission,” Hannibal chided with a wry smile, drying the last of the pans.

Will slowly became aware to stage-whisper giggles and running feet, mouth edging into a sleepy smile as he heard Hannibal catch Micah before the boy did his favorite scramble-and-dive onto his Daddy’s head, the alpha whispering fondly as he walked the boy into their en suite bathroom to be cleaned up for the day. The omega drifted in and out to gentle chatter and running water as his mate and child got ready together, the plodding little feet of Hannibal Junior trying to escape from custody edging into his awareness before he was scoped up by Papa because, *shhhh*, Daddy’s still sleeping, leave him be.

By the time the omega got up to dress and shower, Hannibal already had all the children downstairs eating rye toast with homemade jam. They greet him with broad smiles and a chorus of excitement – because Daddy was *finally* up which meant, next stop: the zoo!

Will took his seat with guilty haste, the nightmares from last night evaporating under the clamor of the Lecter dining table. Hannibal studied him and smiled, warm and full of understanding.

Across the table, Elizabeta shot a look of utter disgust at Micah, who forgot in his fervor to greet Daddy that he was eating.

The four-year old warbled, both hands clamped tight over his full mouth as he turned to Papa, panic clear in his eyes.

Hannibal gave a concerned frown and quickly held a napkin out for Micah to spit out the half-chewed piece of toast, not wanting the little boy to choke. In contrast, Elizabeta primly took a bite of her neatly buttered toast, rolling her eyes with the very special brand of aggravation reserved just for the uncouth younger siblings.

Will paused mid-stroke of his butter knife when the alpha touched his shoulder, leaning in to kiss his jaw.

“Good morning,” his husband murmured, smelling of alpha and coffee.

He hid his shiver.

They arrived early in D.C. to cloudy skies but no predicted rain. Will had been vaguely half-asleep in the Bentley, but two cups of coffee and an sobbing argument between Micah and Junior over the last strawberry in the snack bag had firmly wrenched him out of his meandering to the present. Hannibal had been undisturbed by the ruckus, philosophically cheerful about the raging egos in their backseat. Will had shot him a pleading look to do something before the decibels rose any higher, his children’s honest – though immature – distress drilling into his skull. The alpha settled the dispute by ordering Elizabeta to eat the strawberry in question. There had been a yelp and a screech for *PAPA*, before a stunned silence fell. According to a shocked Micah, his sister had almost bitten off his finger like the monster that she secretly was – even if she was missing her two front teeth. Elizabeta giggled and taunted her younger brother by pretending to want to bite him some more before getting distracted by a horse trailer they passed.

Micah stopped pouting about his finger’s averted amputation once Will promised to kiss it better – not that the four-year old remembered to collect his kiss once they were at the zoo. The car had barely pulled into a parking spot before the child started bouncing up and down in excitement, all his previous declarations of war upon his siblings forgotten. Elizabeta decided that she wanted to visit the lions, and silently sulked when advised that since this was supposed to be Junior’s special day, they probably wouldn’t make it down to that part of the zoo.

“We could come again for your birthday,” Will offered but was firmly rebuffed because *no*, she was holding out for a trip to Disneyland!

At first, Junior was mildly interested but reserving his opinion, eyes-narrowed as he imperiously surveyed this strange new place from his perch in Papa's arms – until he saw his first panda. Wide-eyed, the two-year old watched the gentle giants, random fingers from both hands jammed into his mouth despite Papa's tutting that such a habit was unhygienic, and too bewildered by the sighting to even attempt speech. Micah beamed in delight and threw his arms over the railing of the overlook, helped by a boost from Daddy. The boy hung good inch off the ground despite straining on his tippy-toes to better gape at the trio of giant pandas frolicking among the rocky ledges, bamboos and weeping willows.

Were they some kind of bear, mutant racoons or some strangely-obese and very furry zebra, the two-year old wondered, looking increasingly more flabbergasted when every animal he named (all six of them) were given a fond shake of the head.

His parents shared a smile.

Standing a little away from her family, Elizabeta Lecter's enchantment with the giant pandas wore off quickly, for they were on entirely the wrong end of the zoo for the lions; it seemed more and more unfair to her that Tomas was allowed to sleep over at a friend's place and would be coming to the zoo *with Evan* and Evan's *older* sister, visiting whatever animals he wanted to, while she was stuck with the *babies*. Will rubbed circles on her back but she remained discontent. Catching Hannibal's eye, he whispered in the little girl's ear that they could visit the cheetahs if she wanted to; Eli shot him a grateful smile and took the offered hand.

The six-year old behaved like her usual witty self when just in the company of her omega-parent on their little detour, happily reciting all the facts that she knew about cheetahs that she'd learned from the books – though lions were still her favorite – but by the time they wandered back to rejoin the group, she'd grown sullen again.

Will stroked a hand through her hair, not sure what he could do.

"Do you see them?"

Peering hard at the rocky outcrop in the distant, Micah pouted as he shook his head up at Daddy, deeply disappointed. The crowds had already tripled two-hours into their visit, and father and son had to shuffle around to avoid stepping on any toes as other families also tried to spot the elusive red-tailed panda. Will crouched down to be eye-level with Micah, one hand on the little hip as he pointed out at the creature hidden by the budding spring foliage and artfully-placed rocks.

Beside them, Elizabeta jumped in triumph as she declared, "Daddy, I can see it! I can see it!"

"Where?" Micah asked plaintively with a frown at his sister, then turned to Daddy, disappointment dragging down the edges of his little mouth, "Daddy?"

"Look at my hand. Right…*there*. You see?"

Micah's brows furrowed deeply before his expression cleared, childish enthrallment lighting up his features as he squealed, "I see them! I see them!"

“Okay sweetie, *shhhh*,” Will chuckled, noting the fond looks that turned in their direction at Micah’s loud announcement. “Come on, we still haven’t seen the flamingos yet.”

“Flamingos,” Micah enthused, instantly distracted.

There were flamingos, an entire flamboyance of them all together preening, wings flapping up and down. They strutted through the shallow lake and series of islands allotted to them, twitching and grunting at each other. Elizabeta laughed at the sight of their bright almost-neon pinkness, peeling off ahead in the crowd despite Papa calling for her to slow down and wait for everyone else. Will shared a terse look with Hannibal when the instructions fell on deaf ears and chased after her, heart-lurching at the idea of being separated. He followed the glimpses of her bright blue leggings through the crowd until they were at the flamingo pen and found her waving for him to come here, Daddy! Look!

“Why is he standing like that?” Micah asked, screwing up his face at the flamingos frozen in contemplation, one leg curled up like a complicated ballet move.

“They look funny,” Elizabeta smirked.

“They do indeed,” Hannibal agreed, putting an arm over the little girl’s shoulder and steering her away.

Will’s gaze followed after them, conflicted as Eli grudgingly went with Papa, her face showing that she clearly knew what she was in for.

Hannibal sank down on a convenient bench and pulled the little girl till she was standing between his knees, her small hands cradled in his. The omega couldn’t hear what was being said, but Eli became the picture of meekness once faced with the solemn disappointment of her Pater, little head drooping as she was admonished. Eli must have murmured something to the effect of an apology because with a deep sigh, the alpha pulled her into his lap for an embrace. Elizabeta returned the hug, teary-eyed until Papa whispered something in her ear, making her break out in a full-body laugh.

Will watched their animated exchange with soft eyes, one hand on Micah’s back and the other on Junior’s head.

“Oh! Oh *look*!” Micah cried in delight, pointing out at two flamingos who suddenly fell out of their frozen poses to stalk after another bird. The little boy was almost hopping up and down with excitement, “Look at their legs! Their knees bends the wrong way!”

Junior dug his fingers through the bars of the fence and peered suspiciously at the pink creatures with long spindly legs then looked up at his omega father with an expression that begged for sanity, because truly? Giant pink birds? Will held back on his laughter at the toddler’s very serious expression and picked him up by the underarms. At first the boy fussed, crying out to be put down but quieted as soon as his scrambling feet hit the wide wooden banister. He could see far better from up here, Daddy’s arm slung like a harness around his waist, and his cries for independence were completely forgotten as he reached out and tried to get the birds to come over for a pet.

Shyer children watched wide-eyed with admiration while their parents smiled indulgently, charmed by the little boy's energy. The flamingos ignored him of course, despite several minutes of threats and enticements, and finally the child turned to Will with a crestfallen expression.

The omega chuckled and bundled up the two-year old, who immediately clung to him and burrowed his face into Daddy's neck, seeking much-needed comfort from being so cruelly slighted. Will pressed his temple against Hannibal Junior's soft, soft hair and soothed him as they moved onto the next display.

"They're silly birds," Micah declared, one hand curled around the edge Will's peacoat as he petted his little brother's dangling foot in commiseration, following it up with a matter-of-fact, "Papa told me people a long, long, *long* time ago used to eat their tongues."

"They did, did they," Will commented, amused at the truly random facts that all the children seemed to have picked up somewhere.

The children fell upon the picnic blanket as soon as it was laid out. Hannibal pulled out the cooler from the stroller's basket and with the eldest missing in action, Elizabeta gladly took charge, unzipping the tartan-patterned bag to hand out napkins, fruit and cut sandwiches packed in specially-made Tupperware triangles. Junior smiled beatifically at the banana he was given and warbled a beaming 'Tank you, Eli' which elicited a smile from his parents.

The alpha pulled out the thermos and poured two cups of coffee.

Will muttered a quiet thanks as he took his drink.

Hannibal was as casual as he had ever seen the alpha; no tie, no waistcoat. Instead he wore a crisp navy shirt made out of that same soft material on all his less-formal shirts – it had a hypnotic texture that Will liked to run his fingers across – and an oxblood woollen zip-up underneath his charcoal peacoat. The alpha must have sensed the stare, because Will realized that he was smirking.

"What are you smiling at?"

"You're enjoying yourself," the alpha said, faintly flirtatious.

We're good for you.

Will looked away, hiding a smile and surreal in his deceit, and let their conversation fall to the wayside as their children looked to them, basking in having the undivided attention of Daddy and Papa for an entire day of fun; the elephants were great, were they going to get to see the zebras and giraffes, and oh, could they please visit the farm to see the baby animals? It was spring, there would surely be a few of those.

Junior rubbed at his eyes, cuddling the soft panda doll that Hannibal had bought for him from the giftshop, already beginning to feel the tug of his afternoon nap calling with the big day he's had. He ate his peanut butter sandwich sluggishly, making more of a mess than usual.

Hannibal and he both reached out to wipe the toddler's messy mouth; he got there first and met the alpha's warm gaze with a cocked eyebrow.

Elizabeta slumped against Daddy's side as she ate, enacting stare-downs with anyone who came too close to the invisible perimeter she had decided upon. He wrapped an arm around her and sipped his coffee, eyes ever vigilant as he scanned the faces around them, half-hoping and half-dreading that he'll recognize a face in the crowd. Giving up on food, Junior crawled over to be by his Papa's side and tucked himself into the shadow of the alpha's body, as natural as breathing; he saw Hannibal's eyes flick down to the sleepy infant and crinkle at the corners, fond. Will drew in breaths, one after another, steady as a metronome; he had three different excuses to disappear for a few minutes, and half a dozen ploys in mind to draw any confrontation away from where his husband and children could see or hear.

"Thank you for lunch, papa," Eli beamed, flashing her missing teeth, but she hugged Will.

The Past: 19 February 2003

Dave Graham, a man who had been aged beyond his years by long days in the summer sun, stepped cautiously out onto his porch in boxers and a t-shirt, his thickly curled hair grey and tussled from sleep. His dogs, all four of them, squeezed past and bound down the stairs towards their early morning visitor, panting and baying with joy. It took the fifty-three year old several seconds to realize who was paying him an unexpected visit. Will fell upon one knee in the damp grass with a laugh and allowed the dogs to ambush him, unable to remain reserved in the face of their slobbery enthusiasm. He knew the moment his father finally woke up enough to process his appearance; the beta stiffened, surprise giving away to gruff welcome, followed swiftly by confusion.

"Morning."

His father grunted something that might have been a reply; "Shouldn't you be at work?"

Will met the man's narrow-eyed gaze and felt his smile grow stale. He ducked his head and focused on petting the dogs, letting their welcome bolster his confidence. "Shouldn't you go cover yourself?"

His father rubbed a weary hand over his face, "Nothing you haven't seen before…I need coffee," and turned to head back inside. "On that note, mind explaining why you're here? I thought you worked Wednesdays."

"I did, I was, well, used to."

Will took a bracing breath and buried his fingers deep into the thick coat of Marla, the Australian shepherd, feeling almost ashamed as he admitted, "Actually I've resigned."

The fly-screen door swung open half-way with a screech before rattling to a close. His father turned on his heels and stared at him with blank incomprehension. “You quit your job?”

Will glanced off the side and nodded stiffly.

There was a terse pause before the beta asked the question on his mind, “Is something going on?”

Illness? An accident? Had the boy killed someone? Was he being kicked out? These thoughts and so many others flowed and trickled across his father’s weary face. There was nothing but bad news and worse news that the elder Graham could imagine that would cause someone to quit a good job with good prospects and decent pay; Will wondered darkly which category the old man would consider the truth to fall under.

“Hannibal and I, we’re getting married,” he said all in one breath, feeling his heart jerk as though he had leaped over a hurdle and found himself stalling at the next one; Will almost bit his tongue as he rushed to add, “I’m moving to Baltimore next week, the wedding’s in April.”

It probably wasn’t what his father had expected to hear this morning. Dave Graham looked off into the distance before taking a beleaguered breath, face unreadable in the shadow of the porch awning. “*Well,"* the man drawled, "you sure know how to wake someone up."

Will looked away, mouth pursed as he wet his dry lips.

"Come on in," the elder Graham said, pulling the screeching fly screen door open, "I'll put on the coffee."

Chapter End Notes

This is the official end of the first story and beginning of the second. The second story line technically began the moment that the Ripper killed Budge and displayed him, but this is the end of dealing with the aftermath of Budge - symbolized by the returned cello. I am hesitant to delve too much into the past, simply because I think it deters a bit from the main plot - I mean the past informs it but it's so much more delicious fun when it just springs on you
I got a very bad cold that progressively got worse after I went to a wedding, it's been hard to get any writing done. Yes, it sounds surreal - how is it I never get a break (darling if I ever told you what I've been through the last ten years...)

Much thanks to Eclectic who did a quick read-through of the draft for me :) and Kyuu! Who was like - gimme the fluff lol - and gave me the lowdown on the zoo

Aperitivo

Chapter Summary

To new beginnings.

Chapter Notes

unbetad except for read through by eclectic. dedicated to everyone having a bad time right now in their lives for whatever reason, and esp to kyuu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: February 2003

Will exited the doctor's office, disorientated at the confirmation of what he had already suspected. That the root cause of his nagging sense of exhaustion and the increasingly painful cramps he'd been experiencing for the past few weeks was not a mysterious strain of flu. Something was growing inside of him, no more than the size of an apple seed. It had a spine, a nervous system, and the beginning of the major organs; heart, stomach, liver, kidneys... There was no baby. It wasn't quite yet an embryo but it was growing so quickly it was double the size of what it had been a week prior.

Next week, the collection of cells would be as big as a pea, and grow features, gain a nose, a set of lips. Sweat broke out along his brows and the small of his back as reality slowly sank in like lead weights welded into his bones.

Entering a cafe, Will intended to order a coffee but changed it to a hot chocolate at the last moment, then took a seat in the corner, pinching the bridge of his nose to try and stave off an oncoming headache. The beginning of the dinner rush was happening and slowly but surely, the cafe began to fill up. He wondered what Hannibal was doing, if the alpha was standing alone in his kitchen, beginning prep for his dinner tonight – and if he were turning half-way through washing the spinach to speak to someone that wasn't there. Will felt restless, like something was missing. He loathed the feeling. It came with a dull ache.

He placed a tentative hand on his flat stomach. It didn't feel any different than yesterday or a month ago, but he knew it was there now, waiting, like a bud under the earth in the moist and the dark, preparing to emerge. This was what he wanted, he told himself, breathing deeply as the immensity of what he had done hit him.

Hannibal had wrapped up their trip to his cabin with a visit to Great Falls. The national park had been beautiful, especially the river falls that gave the place its name. It's not something that Will had imagined the alpha to be interested in, just as he had not expected one of their days in Baltimore to involve trawling through Lexington Markets and similar places. He had thought that Hannibal's sense of refinement would bar him from enjoying a day at a chaotic messy market, or a walk along the cold muddy forest paths following the river. But he should have guessed. Hannibal's love of beauty and the unique extended to all things, not just art, music or fine cuisine.

Will had returned to New Orleans, a slow slimy feeling of doubt in his chest. Since sharing his heat, the alpha visited on more or less a regular fortnight schedule but instead of just meals and winding conversation, they would retreat and clutch at each other in a suite of rooms that cost more than five-hundred dollars a night. The alpha would smile every time he saw the ring on Will's finger, and fiddle with it as they wrapped themselves around one another in the sweaty, hot aftermath of sex. They didn't talk about the ring, or what it meant that Will was willing to wear it on their dates.

He imagined the look on Hannibal's face at the news as he sipped the drink, imagined the happiness on the man's face at the news he would be a father. The alpha longed for a family, and would be a good father, a protective father, all that energy displayed in courting transformed into the fortitude needed to raise the child, their child. Hannibal would be so careful, he knew, seeing to the baby's needs with the fastidiousness that was characteristic to him, sparing no expense. He would be kind to Will, the omega had no doubt. They could be good together, they could be happy; he could become the mate that Hannibal Lecter longed for, raise up little alphas with sharp cheekbones and little omegas with curly hair, blend in.

(He had his excuse now. His departure from the fabric of New Orleans life would not raise any eyebrows. He was not the strongest suspect in the 'Enforcer' murders, and now he would be exonerated on the simple fact of his biology.)

He paused mid-sip as he thought about telling his father. The man knew he was dating, from an offhand mention during one of their Sunday night calls, but Will had quickly moved onto another subject, treating it as if it wasn't serious. His father didn't know about the trip up to Baltimore, and hadn't asked. And now… Will worried his lower lip and let his gaze fall upon a holidaying couple pausing outside on the sidewalk, a daughter between them.

"She was not my child, but she was my ward," Hannibal Lecter admitted, his face repainted by the warm orange glow of the fireplace, "I was seven-years older, and my parents fully expected me to either ignore her or disdain her – but I loved her."

Will swallowed the mouthful of wine turning sweet on his tongue, staring. He had hardly ever seen the alpha so honest as now, not bothering or perhaps unable to cover up the agony of the loss even now, some twenty years later.

Tentatively, he reached for his phone.

There’s a loud shatter as someone behind the cafe counter dropped a pitcher.

Will exhaled and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

Back at Laurie, Miss Delia took one look at his face and dragged him into her office.

She's had her suspicions; she’s been around long enough to recognize the signs – did he really think she wouldn't? He’d gone off to visit his alpha gentleman friend for *weeks* with no chaperone, and they stayed chaste? *Ha*! She ain’t stupid. The elderly beta had looked after the omegas of the boarding house for close to thirty years and knew them all; she knew the runners, the tarts, the romantics, the Venus flytraps, the revolutionaries – you name it, she's seen it – and a boy like Will Graham, he'd spook and run given half the chance.

And that's where she came in.

She’s twisting his hand for his own good, and he might hate it now but in time, he’ll see. She’s put up with him running off all those nice alphas after pretending to give them a chance. He was reluctant but he'd see sense soon enough; this doctor from Baltimore would make him very happy if only Will would let him.

“Here,” she held the phone in front of the dear.

He took it and stared up at her, almost shrinking beneath her expectant look.

The conversation went about the way Will imagined it. Hannibal’s quiet for all of thirty seconds at the news before he cleared his throat and asked if Will would see him tonight, when he arrived in New Orleans.

Mouth-dry, he agreed.

Will barely had to touch the door before it flew open. Hannibal’s smile which always seemed so comforting now just made him nervous. He lingered in the doorway, mind drowning in useless minutiae of everyday – that he had an early shift tomorrow, that he couldn't stop feeling guilty over missing dinner, irritated that he felt bad (his lack of appetite wasn't intentional), that he hadn’t showered before coming over and probably should have.

The alpha sighed, eyes soft and wrapped his arms around him, one hand tight over the nape of Will’s neck.

“I wondered when you’d tell me,” Hannibal murmured into his hair.

Will muffled his dark chuckle against the man's shoulder, somewhere between numb and hysterical. "When did you..?"

Hannibal sighed fondly, tucking the younger man under his chin. "I suspected. Doctor's intuition."

Ah.

The alpha's intentions remained the same – he had the means to support a mate, a family, and there was enough an affection between them to build a life together. Will heard the hope building as the older man whispered about health insurance and the best hospitals and getting him on supplements. The shoulder he was resting against tensed quizzically at his silence. Will's eyes fluttered but refused to open. He stayed frozen as the alpha soothed him with broad strokes along his back and shoulders, locked in a tumult of emotions that ran circles around each other like a pack of rabid foxes.

"We don't have to," Hannibal murmured, desperate to appease him, "We can be modern and live together."

He hushed the older man gently with a hand on Hannibal's mouth. It wouldn't be fair to the alpha, who had been nothing but sweet.

Hannibal studied his face when he pulled back enough to nod and gave him a smile of wonderment.

In the same room where he'd told his story about the Bourbon Street Strangler, Will stared mindlessly at the tabletop as the alpha said all the things omegas wanted to hear. He was excited about the baby, that he had brought new furniture to fill the empty rooms of his house, that he'd already taken care of the wedding details (of course he had, it was traditional for the alpha to have all the details settled and ready to go, waiting only upon the omega) that he would look after Will. The doctor dreamed of a large family if Will would obliged him – not as many as the nine children the progenitor of his clan Hannibal the Grim had sired, the alpha beamed mischievously, but at least three or four.

"I need to tell my father," was his only contribution to the conversation.

Hannibal hummed in agreement and nuzzled his hair, his pleasure and satisfaction stinging like vinegar against the rawness of Will's skin.

It took him all of fifteen minutes to quit work. The commander took one look at the ring resting imperiously upon his finger and accepted his resignation, hiding a sigh. Despite the man's disappointment to lose Will's skills and 'unique perspective,' there's never an attempt – *not even a stray thought* – to convince him to stay. The commander was even pleased for him, finding nothing odd about the sudden engagement, or that he was expecting; young Detective Graham, no matter how talented, was an omega who no doubt found himself at a loss in the aftermath of his partner's tragic murder – the security of mating would be good for Will Graham, an alpha to spoil him so that he might finally grow a little meat on those bones.

Will left the commander's office, an ugly feeling in his gut.

It took him all day and well into the evening to finish up all his paperwork and get everything filed. Someone found out about his departure, and soon, everyone was dropping by his desk on their breaks to wish him well. Some eyed the ring dubiously, their eyes filled with questions they were too polite to ask. Mostly his well-wishers meant their words, but sometimes, he glimpsed a hint of resentment. Someone tried to organize an evening at a bar, but Will begged off, citing a headache.

Hannibal was waiting across the street when Will exited, a tiny wry smile on his lips. Will stuck his hands in his pockets as he hurried across the street, relieved and annoyed by his relief and embarrassed at the possessive arm he leaned into as the alpha kissed him sweetly on the cheek.

The week after found him sitting opposite his father in the small functional kitchen of his father's small wooden house near the wildness that faded into the industrial side of Gulfport.

They had been sitting here for several long minutes, punctuated only by the passing of the sugar and the clinks of Dave Graham's spoon, stirring his coffee. Will had declined, helping himself instead to a cup of tea. There was still the smell of last night's cooking in the air – some kind of spicy fish – and a skinned squirrel in the corner, slowly dripping blood into a bowl from where it hung by the legs. He took a sip of his tea. His father kept glancing at the mug of tea he was holding like it was some puzzle to be figured out.

"You cutting down or something?"

"Or something," Will murmured, not looking up.

There's a moment of awkward silence, the only sound being his old man's hand rubbing over his unshaven jaw again and again. Will couldn't help having flashbacks to when he'd been fifteen and hit his first genuine heat, and the taunt silences of the dinners for the week after, when it had finally hit both of them that Will could no longer follow his father around in their truck with a suitcase of belongings, that it wasn't safe anymore, that he needed more than what Dave Graham could give him.

"Who proposed?" His father finally asked, clearing his throat.

"Hannibal."

The old man chuckled, dry. "Course he did – when?"

"Back in January," he replied, seeing no point in bothering to lie.

His father nodded slowly, something between a smirk and a scowl marring his face, "And you waited till now to tell me?"

"I wanted to be sure," he lied.

In truth, Will had no idea what he was doing. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, going on a few dates with Hannibal; something to do, something to stop the worried looks being cast in his direction. Then he'd seen the look on Detective Lambert's face when it sank in that Will was *an omega*, with an alpha courting him for the express purpose of marriage and *children* – the detective, a beta whose preconceptions of omegas came from his mother's love of classic movies, had instantly written him off as a serious suspect in the serial murders. One thing had led to another and another and…

"Then what's with the rush?" His father asked.

The rush was so he wouldn't walk down the aisle with every eye on him, eyebrows raised at the unmistakable girth of his abdomen. The rest of the world might not care but within the traditional circles of Hannibal's peers, there would be talk; the alpha's reputation would be tarnished, not for his indiscretion but for his delay to marry the omega carrying his child, even if Will yelled till he was blue in the face that it was his choice and he preferred it that way.

And despite being thoroughly modern, Hannibal loved his traditions; he wanted the ceremony, the wedding night, to carry Will over a little fake bridge at the reception, just like his ancestors had carried their omegas over a bridge to the wedding dinner, usually crossing the castle moat.

"We don't want to wait," Will said instead and smiled. He had repeated the many reasons for why he was doing this so many times in his mind that it had become a mantra; an alpha who adored him and wanted to start a family with him, who had a fine house and money to support them, who didn't expect him to cook or decorate or clean, who liked Will, really truly liked him – it was reason enough to be content.

By his old man's skeptical frown, he found the whole thing fishy. "Hmm, he can't wait huh?"

An awkward silence fell at that. He knew that his father wanted to say something much more insulting than that and secretly wished that the old man would say it the insulting way so he could get up and snarl something back then storm off to the car.

"Any more surprises you wanna spring?"

Will smiled bitterly down at his mug and took a bracing gulp.

The Present

Will Graham, known in some circles as Will Graham-Lecter, shifted from one foot to the other as he scanned Antonia Greer's personal details, gleaned from her DMV questionnaire, Facebook page and numerous interviews with family, friends and colleagues. He should be in the classroom, prepping for his afternoon lecture or catching up on emails that he'd neglected over the weekend, not here down in the labs.

It's only the first week of term and already he was being drafted on to help with a case – supposedly just to draw up a profile, but Will had his doubts.

There's an increasing hum of activity as slowly but surely the laboratories at Quantico began to fill up, technicians and employees of FBI Forensics department returning from their lunchbreaks. Will's eyes drifted over the half-covered form of the woman before going back to the file. This was the third victim, and the second in Alexandria, Virginia. The unsub already had a *tag*; 'The Alexandria Strangler,' Freddie Lounds had decreed dramatically last

week on her blog, insufferably well-pleased with herself for referencing both the location of the two kills and alluding to the serial killer's preferences: alpha female, white-collar, young, attractive and in the fullness of health.

Will compared the grey-skinned corpse with the photo of the alpha female with short blonde hair, taken at an engagement party just last month. She almost appeared to be a different person in death; Antonia Greer once had lively brown eyes, an expressive face with a plush mouth prone to smiles – the stranger on the table had rusted discs of milky slate for eyes, stone-lipped and blank-faced.

Edward Moses unfolded his arms when his phone started to ring and excused himself to take the call, telling them to go on without him. Will watched him leave out of the corner of his eye and thought about following to find some quiet corner for a quick call home; both Tomas and Junior had caught the flu last week and while the symptoms weren't life-threatening, both children had been listless and miserable. Brian Zeller continued on barely missing a beat in the wake of Moses' departure; there's always an emergency somewhere that required the BAU's attention and his show had to go on.

The beta adjusted the directional lights to highlight the livid bruises on Antonia Greer's neck, his voice drifting back into focus as Will forced himself back into the room; the sooner he finished this the sooner he could get out of here.

"…Hemorrhage pattern suggests strangling on and off over forty-five minutes to an hour – which meant she had the opportunity to fight back. She wasn't drugged yet no tissue or blood under the nails, nothing broken, a couple of bruises but they're inconclusive," Brian Zeller grandly swept his hands over the length of the corpse, as if to say – well, there it was, the evidence – and he was sick and tired of it not making sense (it didn't make sense but people sometimes didn't make sense; he wouldn't admit it but every one of these women made him think of Beverly Katz, the only real alpha female friend he had) "She could just have easily gotten those the day before she was killed. It's the same with all of them."

"She was found in bed?"

"Yup," the beta replied with facetious cheer. "Found posed and looking pretty."

"No bites?"

"Nope. No saliva and no semen."

Will flipped to the crime scene photos and tilted his head at the sight of her, lying supine among an array of pillows, eyes closed as though she were asleep. Her hair was splayed around her neatly and she was slightly turned to one side, an arm and an leg curled around the blankets which covered half of her, the curve of one breast and a slender thigh swelling from beneath the gossamer of her lingerie.

Had she struggled? She must have.

The evidence wasn't there. It should be, but it wasn't – why didn't she fight?

Hannibal poured him a cup of tea, the sound of the liquid hitting porcelain stretching out like a long strange note. "That was one of the more surprising wake-up calls I've had," he murmured with hushed bemusement, "And I've been to boarding school."

"Sorry."

"You surprised me."

"Trust me when I say I was just as surprised," Will sighed wearily as he took the offered mug, nodding his thanks, "Sorry, I was having a dream."

"Were you chasing an assailant?"

"More like wrestling with one," he chuckled cheerlessly into the mug, a half-truth; the most vulnerable parts of the human body during a fight were the head, the eyes, the genitals and the abdomen; the killer whose file he'd been reading was still crawling around the whorls of his brain, leaving indents. Will rubbed his face, frightened of closing his eyes.

"You woke up still fighting," his alpha seemed amused rather than concerned.

And if you had taken a second longer to wake up, I would have driven my elbow into your nose…Will silently took a sip of the hot tea.

"He was in the house already when she got home late from work, he was patient, waited until she went to bed," *until she was vulnerable*; Will drew in a shakily breath; the mad thrashing in the dark; the stifled screams. "She was in deep sleep when he attacked her – probably didn't even realize what was happening at first."

A few seconds was all he needed. The woman's mouth was stretched wide-open, and he could see right down into her pink convulsing throat. She grabbed for his hands clumsily, her entire body quaking in shock at the crushing force lodged against her windpipe. She couldn't see him, he could be anyone, anything – *he was a monster in the darkness* – with the lack of oxygen her brain wouldn't have been able to think properly, all she would know was that she couldn't *breathe*.

Will forced himself to exhale, "He took his time."

And enjoyed it immensely – the women could have been shot, beaten, or stabbed but the killer taken an hour, had wanted to be close, to use his own body instead of an implement, to feel the life leaving her…

The omega averted his eyes back down at the file; "Strangulation usually means urination and defecation at death…"

"She was as clean as a baby's bottom," Price interjected blithely from where he was examining the victim's bedding and lingerie, combing it for evidence.

That's impossible.

"He washed her."

Zeller leaned his hip against a side bench, a thoughtful furrow between his brows.

"He bathed her," Will swallowed thickly, the words almost coarse in his mouth as his brain supplied him with the requisite images of a steamy bathroom, his own tapered fingers brushing the hair from Greer's small breasts, cupping the dead flesh as they sank down together in the pre-filled tub, the intimacy of his fingers brushing the purple areola, sliding down the slack expanses of Antonia Greer's stomach, her skin still soft, still warm...

Jimmy Price shot his fellow beta an unreadable look, "That's what we figured but why would he do that?"

"She was killed on a Friday evening."

He flipped through the file until he found the pictures of her, alive and handsome, dressed beautifully with perfect make-up and perfect hair; his eyes zeroed in on her plain egg-shell nail varnish, those well-manicured fingers wrapped around a flute of champagne. She'd been an alpha woman with a successful career in patent law, lived alone in a new apartment she'd bought last year; she had a sister in Nevada who was married with children that she saw once a year at Christmas; a workaholic, just like the other two. On a hunch, he flipped through file until he got to the photos of Nadine Kramer, the first confirmed kill and the non-Alexandria resident among the three dead – Nadine stared back at him from the page, beautiful and self-assured and nothing at all like Antonia.

Whereas Antonia had been blonde, tall and willowy, Nadine had been short, full-figured and athletic, while the other victim, Alison MacArthur, had been a natural redhead. For a crime that was so personal, the killer hadn't gone for physical-type but something else, a quality of the women's personalities; all three had been classic alpha females – career-driven, with no desire for children and little interest in relationships beyond sexual liaisons.

They were each attractive, each secure in themselves – financially, professionally, sexually – and each seeing themselves as the aggressor, the dominant one.

"Check her nails."

Wearing a vaguely uneasy look, Brian Zeller flipped the sheets to look at the victim's hand. Dark purple vanish gleamed in the blue fluorescent lighting of the labs. "Nail polish – I'd say she got them done recently."

Or she got them done post-mortem.

That's not her color.

"Check the other victims – see if their nails were freshly-painted."

The beta nodded and grabbed his tablet to access the full collection of autopsy photos.

Stepping closer, Will reached out to reluctantly comb his fingers through her limp hair; even cold and half-frozen, her hair was soft, death and cedar and sage wafting from the dark blonde strands. He gulped for air as the smell invaded his nostrils, bringing with it an urge to stroke a thumb across her stone-cold cheeks. He wanted her to look good, to be beautiful for *their weekend* together – the thoughts starting off as observations grew and twisted together into new forms, new strands, until he saw the pattern, "He bathed her, dried her hair, even brushed it, painted her nails. He dressed her in the lingerie he liked best from her collection, cleaned the bed, washed the sheets, put everything and posed her so…"

No need for violence or ugliness when he had complete dominion over her body.

Who's the alpha now, huh?

"So…?" Zeller prompted.

"So it's perfect."

He pretended to step away to read the file but as soon as his back was turned, Will closed his eyes and tried to remember the smell of his children, their sweetness, milkiness; the rich alpha scent of Hannibal sleeping curled on his side, shifting to let Will inch closer and press up against his side; the happy lolling tongues of the dogs; the open kitchen in their converted countryside cabin with floor-length windows, the winter sun lighting up the room as Hannibal served breakfast with Tomas' assistance, Micah and the dogs yawning in unison as they woke up slowly to eggs and freshly squeezed juice and Elizabeta chattering away between bites. Will took in a deep silent breath and opened his eyes.

"It would explain the lack of evidence," Price mused, then in a quiet aside to his fellow forensics investigator, "Well, I suppose if one has to be murdered, I'd pick this guy."

"Seriously?" Zeller made a face then shot his colleague a deeply unimpressed look, "Let me guess – the clean underwear factor won you over?"

"Everyone's dying wish," Price sighed dramatically.

"Yeah," the younger man snorted, "But that was *before* the dilemma of the internet browser history."

Will ignored the two men as they continued to banter, mentally drawing up the report he'd write for Moses who was the lead on this case.

"Mister Graham?"

Everyone turned to the sliding glass doors, Price's mouth pursed comically as whatever retort he had prepared to hurl in his colleague's direction halted mid-syllable.

Special Agent Ed Moses gestured, an unmistakable signal for Will to follow him ad haste. The omega frowned but put down the case file, stripping off his gloves for the disposal bins as the head investigator of the BAU led him out from the warrens of FBI forensics and into the bright light-filled corridors of the public thoroughways.

“Baltimore PD just called in a homicide,” Moses whispered, his crisp tones made brittle, shooting a terse glance at a group of trainees who wandered past; “A Quantico graduate, Pierce Hanson, was just found shot and mutilated in his home. They’re holding the scene for us until we get there.”

Will drew in a breath and held it as he forced down the pre-emptive wave of anxiety.

The street was already cordoned off by a barricade of federal vehicles and police tape when they arrived at the squat townhouse Pierce Hanson shared with his partner, a beta woman named Jena Lopez. She didn’t raise her head from where she’s staring at her knees, a drained glass dangling from her hand when the senior officer-on-scene introduced Moses. The head investigator of the BAU sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed that Jena had once shared with FBI Trainee Pierce Hanson and flashed her his badge, voice cool yet personable as he reconfirmed the facts with her. That she had been away for work, a surprise trip; she’s a junior account manager with her employer, a pharmaceutical multi-national. That she’d spent the last fortnight in London; in between the inconvenience of the time difference and Hanson’s declaration via email he was considering a long hike and camping trip, she’d noticed but hadn’t worried at the lack of a reply.

Someone knew she was gone, someone waited until Pierce Hanson was preparing to go on a trip, had informed those who might contact him…

Will slowly approached the dining room, eyes roaming the carpet to avoid the pictures on the walls (Hanson had been chiselled and lean, with ginger-hair and blonde eyebrows and freckles; there’s pictures of him biking, pictures of him with Jena on beach, a holiday in Mexico where his skin turned red and blistered; the couple in graduation robes; degrees issued by Culver framed) where investigators were circling the mutilated corpse, spread-eagle on the black vanish of the table. It’s obviously not used for meals, judging by the disarray of papers, magazines, books and miscellany flung about, most of it happening to land on the floor when Hanson had landed on the table. There’s blood, much more than the scene in December and Will paused at the smell that hit him as soon as he leaned in closer.

Pierce Hanson had bled like a stuck pig, the bullet pulverising his jugular so that it had exploded, sputtering blood everywhere – most of it had soaked into the papers, magazines, books and miscellany.

One of the forensic examiners paused at the sight of Will and looked to his superior for instructions. A vaguely familiar elderly woman with crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes regarded him with exasperation as he shuffled along the perimeter of the room, his eyes locked upon the trainee’s corpse.

Hanson was arched somewhere between grace and torment over several volumes of souvenir art books from the Vatican, encrusted with blood - it was almost sculptural, the frozen slurries over the taunt stretch of the man's mangled throat. Will fished out the gloves that someone had handed him and slid them on, a furrow growing between his brows as he took in the rib-cage with its bruised and sunken lungs, the missing shadow where a heart should be, and saw for the first time what *wasn't* there.

Usually copy-cats would slip up – after all, playing at being a famed serial killer didn't preclude a transfer of skill and experience. But so far, whoever the killer was, he had displayed at least enough proficient with forensic countermeasures to stay at large.

No Columbian neck-tie.

No slashed arms.

No stab wounds from arcane tools and regular two-dollar screw-drivers, just bemused clinical brutality: Pierce Hanson had been shot and butchered.

Will drew in a sharp breath.

"You're certain it's not the same killer?"

A soft meandering piece of Chopin played quietly over the speakers as Will watched Hannibal salting a long piece of pork loin, rubbing in the homemade spice mix with long broad strokes of his hand. By now, the alpha's fingers were pink from the sting of the salt. The sight reminded him of long lazy summer afternoons by the Mediterranean, sitting on the ramp that stretch right into the water. Hannibal would do laps while Elizabeta doggedly tried to follow him. The alpha usually paused for a rest on the fourth lap and would lean against Will's knees as he rested or had a drink; his fingers had usually been pruned pink.

"Yes. Probably, I don't know," The omega sighed and ran a haphazard hand through his hair. He had been distracted all evening, but hadn't had the chance to share anything until now, outside of hearing range of the children, "The ME will have finished the autopsy by tomorrow evening so I'll know more then."

The alpha gave him a thoughtful look, "Could it be the genuine article?"

"The real Butcher?"

Hannibal gave him a chiding smile, "You sound sceptical."

Will picked up his glass of whiskey, mouth twisting, "I *am* sceptical–"

There had been a kill last July, right on cue with the Butcher's usual pattern and a week into the family trip abroad. He'd been forced to stay up one night in Switzerland, balancing his laptop on his knees in the bathroom as he gave his observations while Hannibal and the children slept on unawares that their vacation was being intruded upon. Again, it had strayed from the known victim-type (the *only* victim type, he could see it even if he wasn't himself anymore) and he'd gone through the motions of pointing out the inconsistencies, but demurred from making too strong a point of it – it was after all in his favour if the FBI continued to believe that the Butcher was active while he was an entire continent away, even if Freddie Lounds' renewed attention was always unpleasant. He hadn't looked into it further or since, having assumed that it was the same copy-cat. Now Will wondered if he should have paid more attention.

"–because it's *not* the Butcher – like I said, it's not even the same guy."

There was a thoughtful pause as the alpha bent again to focus on his prep-work, "Maybe it's never been the same guy."

"No, no," he shook his head, his mind already fluctuating between what he knew of the previous Not-Butcher murders and the prelim reports on Pierce Hanson. "There are *three* distinctive signatures here – the Butcher, the first copy-cat, and now the second. The copy-cats have *just* enough accuracy to their methodology to labelled as possible Butcher kills, and yet, there's a distinct difference in how they express what they know."

Hannibal paused to take a sip of his wine, his eyes tracking Will as the omega began to pace around the counter, hands pressed palm to palm as if in supplication, his middle fingers worrying away at his chin .

"What is it they know?"

Will exhaled loudly as he finally slowed to stop an arm's length from the alpha, struggling to put into words the exact minute details that set Pierce Hanson's murder apart from the two deaths last year.

"They know that their predecessor chose his victims – that none of the kills were crimes of opportunity. The first killer, he had a preference for victims with names starting with the letter T; he's an expert shot but cut open the throat anyway in tribute, yet removed the heart in what could be called a *fit* of savagery."

"The use of hands to break open a man's ribs is quite barbaric – as well as a show of almost supernatural strength."

"Exactly. Now the latest guy, he's either a bad shot or wanted the trainee to bleed to death; he used a rib-spreader but there was no further mutilation than the removal of the heart. Again, post-mortem, no scalpel incisions."

It's not that he hadn't felt good in the moment of the kill, the power of it, but that he hadn't revelled in it, hadn't glutted himself on the sensations like the other one…

"Variations on a theme," Hannibal mused, "Could they be communicating with one another?"

"Ever thought about them getting together?"

Will snorted to cover up the alarm that he felt at that idea. It's ridiculous but then there were plenty instances of the ridiculous mixed in the macabre when it came to his consultations with the BAU. He went back to the stool pulled out for him but didn't sit on it. It's hard enough for petty criminals to trust each other, but between killers?

But if they managed it, just think about the possibilities...

"A *ring* of copy-cats?"

"I didn't realize we were already onto conspiracy theories."

Will hid his wry smile behind a desultory sip of whiskey.

"They could be experimenting together," the alpha suggested, "People have an innate desire for connection; we often seek to find the like-minded, people whom might by their own similar experiences or philosophies bridge the gap that exists between every human being."

"Oh now they're *friends*."

The humor was quickly snuffed out. It's entirely possible, Will realized, he thought it unlikely but couldn't discount it; there's something to the murders, something deeper than just fifteen-minutes of fame and an inflated sense of self. Copy-cats often liked the media attention, which often meant escalations, but there had been none of that.

"Killing can be a primal thing, deeply personal – legal and moral issues aside."

Well it had certainly been personal for him.

The alpha ran the tap, rinsed off the mortar and pestle, then briskly washed his hands, "Coming across someone with similar proclivities would be rare."

Will scoffed at that, "The internet has it's corners I'm sure."

"Perhaps, but those are nothing but talk," Hannibal pivoted on a foot to fetch the tea towel from where it hung and dried his hands in efficient practiced motions; Will could imagine the alpha doing the same ritual post-surgery, back in Hannibal's OR days, "No one is themselves when they say or imagine such things – it's madness that lasts only as long as the moon is up, and gone with the dawn."

"So what? They found each other and now they're *bonding*?"

Hannibal's eyes crinkled as he chuckled, drawing out thick brown butcher's paper to wrap the meat with, to let it rest and be infused with the flavors. "Not quite how I might have put it but yes – who among us doesn't want understanding and acceptance."

He met the alpha's searching gaze and smiled back. In a month's time, it would be a year since he first woke up thirteen years in the future. He still opened his eyes in the night sometimes, dread in the pit of his stomach as he pressed his nose up against Hannibal's neck.

But it's never a dream, and the alpha would always turn, waking briefly to wrap an arm around him, whispering that it was the middle of the night in Baltimore and he was Will Graham-Lecter and he was in their master bedroom on the third-story, while their four children and three dogs slept downstairs in their own beds and – *go to sleep, Will.*

Hannibal always said his name like an endearment.

"Interesting theory," Will drained the last of his drink, "Trust would be an issue."

"Like you said, the internet has its corner – perhaps this is a way of separating the pretenders from the true believers."

"Initiation, with the added benefit of a little mutual blackmail."

It would go a long way to explain some aspects of this bizarre situation.

"If they know each other, then why aren't they striking at the same time then? Or showing off? Upping the ante?" He pondered aloud, "Killers aren't known for their good sportsmanship."

Unless there was a pecking order.

"Maybe they're protégés," the alpha suggested, plucking the idea from Will's head. "Someone they both know who has power over them."

"Brothers in arms," Will muttered, "Under a common banner."

"One cannot be delusional if the belief in question is accepted as ordinary by others in that person's culture or subculture." Hannibal tied the last knot on his package of spiced meat and met his omega's troubled gaze, "Or family."

"*Truite Saumonée* à *la Tomate et Fenouil, Pommes Persillées*."

Dave Graham looked from his plate of fish to the serving platter of char-grilled vegetables dotted with edible roses made of tomatoes with clear bemusement and gave his only granddaughter a cheeky grin, leaning over to nudge her in the side, "A true *what*? Did you understand any of that, sweetheart?"

The little girl broke into giggles and quickly set the old man straight with childish seriousness, "No, grandpa! It's *truite saumonée* à *la tomate et fenouil!"*

Hannibal Lecter beamed proudly across the table at his daughter's almost-perfect imitation before serving a portion of fish to his husband; the omega's eyes flicked between his father's chuckles and his own plate, stomach tightening despite the fact that Hannibal hadn't even picked up on the undertone of insult. It was just a jest, something said in good humor; but

there's too many incidents of disinterest and casual derision from the old man for such comments to be entirely innocent.

"The trout has been stuffed with tomatoes flavored with dill," The alpha explained, "paired with a side of potatoes, lightly pan-fried with parsley and butter."

"Well, why didn't you just say that," the old man drawled, elbowing Eli lightly, drawing another grin from the little girl.

Holding his omega's gaze, Hannibal smiled dryly obviously well-versed by now in his father-in-law's vehement beliefs in deriding anything he perceived as fussy and served Tomas next, the thirteen-year old boy murmuring his thanks in French. The alpha squeezed his firstborn's shoulder before moving around to serve a portion for himself.

"The recipe traditionally calls for trout caught from a fresh water brook, but so rarely do I have access to such fresh produce; beautiful fish, David."

"Why thank you – and also, thanks for letting me steal Will and the kids for the weekend. We had great fun catching these suckers, didn't we kids?"

There's a domino of nods from all the children except Junior, who continued to flick the propellers of his plastic helicopter toy that the strange old man had brought for him with a rapture reserved for the perplexing and the wondrous. It had been a good trip, with his father far more preoccupied with showing his grandkids the sights than poking at Will.

The alpha smiled genially as he set the serving platter aside for seconds, before excusing himself to bring the filleted trout prepared for the younger children. His father smiled at him as Hannibal left, the expression startling on a face that Will had long associated with a lack of expression. He smiled back tentatively then checked on Junior who was turning the helicopter over in his hands, examining its underside.

This was the second visit from his father this year, and already the end of the week couldn't come fast enough.

Will didn't know if it was nostalgia, compassion or stupidity that had influenced him to accept Dave Graham's wishes to visit more often than once every two or three years. Perhaps it was the fact that his father was *old*, far older than he had envisioned when he'd forced himself to come to terms with his jump of thirteen-years into the future. Much more likely it was because his father was lonely; the man's friends were already beginning to disappear into the ground, done in by decades of hard-living. No longer a strapping man in his fifties, tanned and wiry with long hard muscles, the elder Graham looked all of his sixty-eight years, white-haired and speckled with age.

Hannibal came back with food for the children and soon, everyone was eating, the candles clustered in the middle of the table casting long toothsome shadows through the circlet of horns that had been picked for the centerpiece tonight.

"Been busy with work?" The old man asked, looking between Hannibal and him.

“Nothing unreasonable,” the alpha replied with a easy smile, “There are benefits to being your own employer.”

Will’s hands twitched around his knife and fork as his father began to ask questions about what it was exactly that Hannibal did, as though he hadn’t asked them before. It’s not the first time that they’ve had this conversation, and though he’s technically still missing a good ten years worth of memories, Will had no doubt that this was a tired topic. Dave Graham couldn’t quite hide his bewilderment – or resentment – that his son-in-law earned eight times the amount he made slaving away under the sun, for nothing more than talking to people about their problems; in his mind, that sort of thing earned someone a beer, not mortgage repayments. At least he kept it polite, Will supposed, hiding his terse inhale behind a sip of wine.

His initial impressions at the hospital that the old man had not endeared himself to Hannibal had been more than accurate. In what memories he had recovered, his father had told the alpha at the private introduction meal that while it might be a habit among *your people* to buy omegas, they were in the US of A and that ‘bride price’ that Hannibal had offered him was illegal.

The relationship had thawed since according to the alpha, but Will had a feeling that was just his husband being kind.

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You working again right?”

He shrugged as he turned to attend to Junior, mindful that anything he could possibly say that would interest his father would be too graphic for the audience at this table, “It’s been fine.”

“Will is far too modest for his own good,” Hannibal chided with a smile, the warm pride of it making the younger man’s mouth tug at the corners, “As always there is a waiting list for his classes and he’s published two articles since his return to the Academy, both well-received.”

“Huh,” his old man said eloquently.

“We don’t talk about my work at dinner time,” Will quickly said, cutting off whatever questions his father had been meaning to ask. Talking about work was never a good idea; his father inevitably somehow always managed to turn the conversation back to the time Will had abandoned a perfectly good, not to mention, *paying* apprenticeship at the docks to run off to college. The alpha glanced at him, swiftly changing the subject before the lapse could grow into uncomfortable silence.

For awhile they talked about the best fish to be used for certain recipes, and the alpha tried to convince the old man that it was truly quite easy to make a white wine reduction with nothing but six ingredients including the wine, while his father insisted that fish required only a little salt and pepper, maybe a wedge of lemon, to make a meal – and really, it was downright weird what Hannibal did last time, pulling the tails through the fishes’ mouths.

“This is delicious,” Will murmured, face carefully blank as he held back his irritation.

“Hmm, yes, this is pretty good though,” the old man grudgingly admitted.

“I prefer it,” Will added, holding his husband’s gaze. Hannibal acknowledged the compliment – and the unspoken apology – with a sly wink before turning back to his father-in-law.

“Do you have any specialties in your repertoire, David?”

“What, like a go-to recipe?”

“Neither of us cooked,” Will said quickly, already noting the way that his old man was gearing up to tell some blatant story to keep his pride, as if such a thing mattered when Hannibal could give a professional chef a run for his or her money.

“Now wait a minute,” his father interrupted, his laugh a little forced.

“Dad isn’t big on anything that isn’t grilled or microwaved and I learned to cook out of necessity,” he confessed wearily, lest the old man think he was trying to sell himself as the cook of his childhood home – because that was *just like* Dave Graham, wasn’t it, needing to get one over on his own kid, “but my food was barely edible. It was mostly heating things up from a can or making grits.”

It’s nothing that Hannibal didn’t know; the alpha had married him knowing that Will had no cooking skills outside of gutting and grilling fish, and his husband hadn’t minded, for he’d rather they didn’t fight over the kitchen space.

“We had a grand total of three pots, and five forks.”

“Six,” his father stated, voice hard beneath his carefully even tone, “and it was a full-set with matching knives and spoons.”

“Five,” Will insisted, sick and tired that they were even arguing about this, “You destroyed one when you were fixing John Rutherford’s boat.”

The old man huffed in mild offense before deflating with a sigh, the sound of it blending in with scratch of his fork across the bone porcelain as he chased a piece of fish, “You always did have good recall. Fine then, five forks it is.”

And several containers worth of fast-food cutlery and their logo-emblazoned napkins, swiped during birthday meals and the occasional holiday treat at various takeaway outlets. Will swallowed thickly, mouth suddenly dry and his head aching as he realized what he was doing, what he wanted to do, that he was breathing faster, that his chest felt heavier. He reached for his wine and drank more than was polite, pissed off and confused about being pissed off and tired of the tug of war he felt obligated to participate in even though he had the feeling that his father had long since given up on it. Hannibal stood up and came to him with the pretense of topping up the wine. Will closed his eyes at the surreptitious squeeze of his shoulder, tilting to rub his cheek to his alpha’s wrist.

When he opened his eyes, he caught his old man averting his gaze.

"Willy here used to make spaghetti with canned tuna, ketchup and instant noodles."

He chuckled wryly at the perplexed frown on Tomas' face, "Your dad was very thin as a child."

"You're still skinny," his old man snorted.

"I'm fine."

"You need to feed him better, Han."

Will shot his father a withering smile; the alpha put up with the man, somehow blessed – or cursed as it may be – to be polite but he didn't have to. "*Hannibal* is very careful about what we put into our bodies, which is why he makes almost everything we eat from scratch; we eat *very* well."

And the truth was, he would never put on a lot of weight. Inherited genetic disposition towards a trim build aside, being omega meant burning hot, with a higher than beta-average kilojoules intake due to differences in physiology. Not that his father understood this…

His old man chewed slowly on his mouthful of fish flesh before turning to the alpha, "You make it all yourself huh?"

"Papa makes all our jam," Micah piped up brightly still chewing before hastily covering his mouth at his Daddy's pointed smile. The five-year old hastily swallowed before he said to his grandfather, "I like the marmalade one best, papa uses bleeding oranges."

"Blood oranges," Hannibal corrected, fond.

Micah shrugged with an *opsies* grin, already a charmer, and went back to his food.

"A mix of Seville and blood oranges actually," Hannibal said, holding the wine glass under his nose for a brief moment before his careful sip. "It's really very simple. The only other ingredients besides the fruit is sugar and water."

"Is that right?"

Will glanced at his old man out of the corner of his eye before slicing off another piece of fish.

It's almost a relief when the house phone began to ring. Excusing himself, Will quickly stood and left to get it before the alpha could offer to go in his stead.

"Hello?" He answered shortly, expecting a telemarketer.

"Mister Graham," a man greeted, an odd quality to his voice, "This is a courtesy call. We're acquainted, though I suspect you don't know me anymore."

In the dining room, there was light laughter as his old man began to tell one of his fishing stories again. Will stared down the dim hallway, eyes catching upon the trio of Japanese

prints – mother, warrior and monster – as he forced himself to step further into the lounge and away from where someone might hear. Less than a dozen people knew of the depths of his memory loss, and he knew the voices of every single one of them.

“Who is this?”

“Who I am is not relevant – rest assured, we’ll see each other soon. You need to listen carefully to me, Mister Graham. Are you listening?”

Behind him, there was a flurry of sound and chatter as Tomas and Eli began to clear the table, while Hannibal disappeared down the corridor in the opposite direction to the kitchen, no doubt to check on dessert; the alpha would be headed in his direction soon, wondering what was happening.

“Yes,” Will whispered.

“Your husband,” the voice on the phone enunciated, emphasizing *husband* as though it were some conundrum, “He knows more than he’s telling you, and so does Jack Crawford. You should be careful, Mister Graham.”

There was a sharp click as the stranger hung up on him abruptly.

The omega lowered the receiver from his ear and stared at it for a silent moment.

“Will?”

He whirled around and almost slammed straight into Hannibal, wishing not for the first time he could hang a bell on the man. The alpha’s arm went around his waist.

“Who was that on the phone?” Hannibal asked as he took the receiver out of the younger man’s hand, hitting the buttons to check the caller ID. The phone screen flashed *ID Unknown*.

“Nothing,” Will leaned in to kiss his alpha, “I think it was the wrong number.”

Chapter End Notes

updates affected by the fact i cut my arm and had my own mizumono blood bath.
severed muscles and tendons in my left side, needed surgery and a stay in hospital, forearm/hand is wrapped and immobilised, it's surprising difficult to manage things though my dominant hand still works
(Too much character research into Will Graham lol)
much thanks to eclectic who encouraged me to post even though i just feel crap and helped me fix and add to my draft
The Alexandria strangler is based in part on the killer in Gillian Anderson's show The Fall

PS: I used Siri a lot to help correct and polish this chapter and according to eclectic I should give thanks to her

Apparecchiare la tavola

Chapter Summary

A chance re-acquaintance, an out of state trip and a midnight re-acquaintance, a reaffirmation and a warning, and finally, a past re-acquaintance.

Chapter Notes

The title is Italian for 'setting the table'
enjoy! In the last scene, there's black gloves mentioned - those were a gift picked out by the kids lol it's a dog thing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will allowed himself to swallow only one mouthful of champagne – a polite amount – as one person said their farewells only to be replaced quickly by another.

“It’s been too long since you properly cooked for us, Hannibal,” Eloise Komeda declared without preamble, her voice still that same nasally whine. The woman was a little sharper in the face and a little narrower in the mouth that what Will remembered of her, but more or less unchanged by the last fourteen years, a trick of cosmetics and an elegant pampered lifestyle.

Hannibal smiled with his usual debonair charm, “Come over and I will cook for you.”

“I said *properly* – that means dinner and a show,” Eloise Komeda teased with a pointed look at Will, “You know what I’m talking about, dear, you’ve seen him cook – it’s an entire performance!”

The alpha chuckled at the praise along with her circle of acquaintances.

“Your husband used to throw such exquisite dinner parties,” the beta lamented dramatically at Will before fixing the subject of her commentary with a mock-scowl, “You heard me, Doctor, *used* to.”

“And I will again,” Hannibal replied with cheerful solemnity, “Once inspiration strikes.”

Eloise Komeda rolled her eyes. “Darling, your inspiration is standing right next to you; I still haven’t forgotten that absolutely enchanting birthday bash he threw for you, Will – our doctor here served wine all keyed to his darling husband’s birthday.”

She spun to tantalize her captive audience with further anecdotes, eyes fluttering shut in an expression of remembered bliss, before turning back to the couple in question.

“Will, my dear,” she said, hands on her hips, “do something, one shouldn’t have to wait till Christmas for a taste of that divine cooking, it’s inhuman.”

He leaned into the alpha as he felt Hannibal’s arm tighten around his waist, a gentle reassurance.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he smiled.

“You cannot force a feast,” Hannibal cut in, thankfully drawing the attention back to himself.

“That's what you *always* say, you perfectionist,” the woman looked heavenwards before winking in Will’s direction as she turned on a heel, waving enthusiastically to some other long-lost acquaintance in the crowd even as she fixed Will with one last suggestive smile. “I trust you know what to do, Mister Graham-Lecter.”

Will watched her slink away and took a well-deserved drink from his champagne. The bubbles sizzled across his tongue pleasantly and went down cold into his stomach. Next to him, Hannibal turned to greet an elderly alpha gentleman in a mustard-yellow bowtie who hobbled closer with the assistance of a cherry-wood walking stick, shaking the man’s hand with warm respect. His arm never left from around Will’s waist.

“Professor Holworthy, it’s been awhile,” his husband greeted warmly, “Did you enjoy the performance?”

“I did, very much so,” the elderly man replied, “Is this who I think it is, Hannibal?”

With a bright smile that made the alpha boyish despite his forty-seven years, Hannibal turned to face him, “Yes, this is my mate.”

Will introduced himself and gave the elderly alpha a smile, possibly his first genuine expression the entire night, as the retired medical professor confessed with good-humor to have doubted his existence, though truly, he should have known that Hannibal Lecter would only end up with the loveliest of creatures.

Hannibal’s preening glow was only a shade lighter than the flush that crawled up Will’s neck, somewhere between embarrassed and irked, as the elderly doctor regarded him with all the distant fondness of a grandfatherly patriarch. How wonderful to finally meet the man who made Lecter an honest alpha, did Will know that he had broken a dozen hearts by stealing him? Hannibal chuckled and insisted that he’d made his choice. How were their children – *fine* – did they really have four – *yes*, three alphas and an omega – and my, my, that was a large brood, obviously not for Doctor Holsworthy’s generation where he’s one of seven children, but certainly for today.

Hannibal looked so smug with the compliment. Endeared by his alpha’s paternal devotion, Will edged between second-hand pride and unease over the discussion, which was just short of the old professor congratulating his ex-student on securing a fertile mate and doing his

duty *right*. It would be crude from someone else, but the ancient alpha only meant it as the highest of compliments.

“You’re very lucky,” the old alpha sternly advised Hannibal, then to Will, eyes soft with nostalgia; “May you have many happy years together, my dear.”

It’s hard to hold onto his offense faced with such wholehearted well-wishes, but it’s a relief when the conversation then continued on without him. Hannibal’s arm tightened around his waist, a warm reassurance that the alpha was paying attention and was aware of his omega’s plight. Will leaned into the alpha’s body, his entire body reacting to his husband’s proximity, before remembering where he was.

Wearing what he hoped was a pleasant smile, he excused himself, pretending to have caught sight of some acquaintance in the crowd. Both alphas smiled and watched him go, the fondness in Hannibal’s gaze pulling at him.

In the past six months, he’d been to a charity ball, the opera, the ballet and two classical recitals, and was more or less used to the rigors of *society*. Apparently, these were all things that the mate of Doctor Lecter did to make said Doctor Lecter happy and he’d done the rounds, eager to fit back into his old life as though nothing had happened.

Swapping his empty flute for a full one at the bar, he surveyed the crowds, simultaneously bored and on edge.

Ever since that phone call, he felt like he was back to holding his breath again. It was *completely ridiculous*, this sudden wariness, all because some stranger on the phone.

He’d observed nothing amiss in Hannibal’s mood or habits but maybe... But it *wouldn’t happen*, he promised himself; he would never allow that look of horrified confusion to darken Hannibal’s face, never be forced to make that choice.

Will inhaled deeply, eyes shut, and took another sip. It tasted almost bitter.

The call had spooked him, knocked loose the gnawing sense that it couldn't be *that easy* to hide his past. He’d been waiting for the shoe to drop, for months now if he’s honest.

Attempts to trace the phone call back had met with little success; he’d gotten a location (Minnesota border gas station, with an adjoining motel and diner) but there were no cameras watching the courtesy landline for guests in the office, and one suspicious phone call wasn’t enough probable cause to charge local law enforcement to show up in person to get a description.

He’s half-way to entertaining scenarios bordering on paranoid delusion when someone suddenly took the seat next to him at the bar, dropping onto the stool heavily. The stranger gestured imperiously at the bartender for a refill.

“Mister Graham – or should that be Lecter tonight?”

Will slanted a look at the alpha who had spoken to him, but made no other gesture to show he'd heard the man at all. The alpha was mid-forties, well-groomed, with unremarkable though pleasant features, and a slight paunch that spoke of too many rich meals. He's been around Hannibal long enough to tell that the tailoring was slightly off, not quite as effective at hiding the softness of the man's form...

A face he'd seen previously on *Tattle-crime.com* smirked back at him when he finally bothered to glance at the man's face.

"Hello Will."

"Doctor," he greeted, swallowing thickly as his pulse fluttered.

"Frederick," the man corrected, voice lowering to the dulcet smooth tones of presumed intimacy, "after *everything* we've been through together, Will, I think we've moved past formalities, don't you?"

Doctor Frederick Chilton shifted on the stool, one arm propped on the bar in a pose of pretentious ease and his other hand curling over a cane with an ornate silver-coated handle, his smile painfully solicitous, all his hopes and dreams and fears smeared across his face like grease on eggs. Will shied from the psychiatrist's gaze, disdain pulling against his second-hand embarrassment on Chilton's behalf as he saw the two failed relationships in the sharp edges of the corners of the alpha's mouth, the sexual frustration in how his nostrils flared at the proximity of Will and two dozen other omegas present, the yearning for adulation behind the polished ease of his grin.

"I had been hoping to catch you tonight," the alpha confided, almost flirtatious.

Will turned away, stiff under the unwelcome regard.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I wanted to offer my personal congratulations," Chilton replied with cavalier cheer, his voice broadcasting down half the bar and making more than one head turn in their direction. Attention only seemed to make the man more outrageous; leaning back, the alpha made a grandiose toast with his refilled champagne flute, liquid frothing dangerously at the rim of the glass, "You've done some brilliant articles for *The American Journal of Psychiatry* since your return to Quantico. Quite an achievement considering everything that's happened. Well done."

It's not clear if he was being complimented or insulted.

"Thanks…I think."

Chilton beamed, undeterred by the cool reception.

"Anyway," the man continued on blithely, "I wanted to let you know that I'm looking forwards to working together."

Will snorted under his breath, "You're joining the FBI?"

“The FBI? Ah, no,” the man chuckled loudly. It wasn't quite loud enough to cover up his grimace. “Haven’t you heard? I’ve offered my abilities to the BAU and resumed my role as a consultant – pro bono, of course.”

Of course.

“Who knows,” Chilton said brightly, “perhaps we’ll catch the Chesapeake Ripper together after all.”

That would make all of Chilton’s dreams come true.

Will felt a headache coming on just at the thought of having to deal with the man at a crime scene, right out of one of his trances.

“Anyhow,” Frederick Chilton smoothed a hand down his tie, “Let’s hope that Hannibal won’t be jealous of all the time we’ll be spending together. I’m actually looking forwards to it – it’ll just be like old times.”

Will swallowed a sour sip of champagne as Chilton shot him a grin that aimed for mischievous charm but instead came off as something closer to a leer.

“You mean, when I was tossed in your dunking tanks accused of murder?”

The alpha’s grin turned flaccid.

“I have missed your wit,” Chilton ground out between the gleam of his reapplied smile. Picking up his cane, the man stalked away.

Exhaling, Will threw back the rest of his drink.

“Here is fine, just pull over,” he ordered the driver, then got out before the beta began to protest that there was no way Will was going to get past those cops. Pulling out his small bag from the trunk, he let his eyes glide over the crowd already gathered in front of police tape, trying to figure out how he could get in without attracting attention; everyone and their grandma had their phones out, already recording.

Tasteless, he snorted under his breath as he handed over a fifty to cover the bill. The beta shrugged – he didn’t like leaving an omega so close to a crime scene but hey, it was none of his business – before backing up to do a U-turn.

Will watched the cab go, wondering suddenly if he should have made the driver wait around for a quick getaway.

It had been a quiet few weeks since the Not Butcher(s) had left a calling card, and he’d been secretly apprehensive when Beverly Katz had showed up towards the end of his Wednesday

class. But it was the Ripper instead – or rather, a murder that ticked enough boxes on VICAP to land straight on the desk of the BAU.

Slinging the bag strap higher on his shoulder, he fumbled for his badge and flashed it discretely at the officer standing guard at this side of the street. He got a few stares as he ducked under the tape, but his nondescript clothes allowed him to quickly blend with all of the off-duty officers called in to assist.

At least three different ambulances were present, the light of each spilling over the wet pavement to mix in with the bleeding reds and blues. Will eyed the patients – an older woman, a teenager, a middle-aged couple with the man in an oxygen mask – all in shock, all pale and listless under the ugly shock blankets draped over their shoulders. It took him a minute once he was in to locate Jack Crawford, standing at the centre of the chaos, one hand in his pocket and his other hand pointing up high towards the power lines. Beverly Katz gave him a discreet wave from where she was preparing to take over from local CSI; Will flashed her a small smile but kept on course.

“Jack,” he greeted.

The alpha turned, a sheen of sweat already collecting at his brows despite the damp coolness of the evening, “Will,” he greeted then without losing a beat, herded him to the front stoop where a plain-clothes officer stood. “Detective Johnson, this is Special Agent Will Graham. If you could show him the crime scene...”

The square-jawed beta woman in her fifties, wind-chaffed with her fading red-hair in a sloppy bun, scanned him with a widening of her eyes that she wasn’t quick enough to hide. She muttered a cursory greeting then spoke into her radio for the scene to be cleared, leading them into the two-storey wooden house painted in traditional white past the officers and the FBI jackets shedding gloves and itemising collected samples under the glow of headlights. She’s been a detective for over fifteen years and thought she’d seen everything, but obviously she’d spoken too soon; the family had gone out to dinner but Doctor Newman had stayed home citing that she'd catch up once she finished up her latest article.

“She never showed and didn’t answer any of her calls. When they got back, they found the lights on and, well, I hope you have a strong constitution,” the local detective warned, glancing at Crawford askance more than once – shocked perhaps that the alpha was allowing an omega into such a graphic crime scene, even if he was a special investigator.

She turned at the end of the hallway into the study.

Will followed her cautiously into the room, eyes fixed on the floor.

Crawford came in behind him at a polite distance, movements broadcasting his weariness. “There's surgical incisions, most of the damage is post-mortem.”

He nodded tightly as he scanned the dark murky blood puddle gathering over the polished wooden floors.

The woman laid spread-eagle on her fainting couch, her hands coyly placed over her stomach – *she's the patient tonight, see how she likes it* – her jaw bone unhinged and pulled free to show off her naked bloody trachea like a particularly gruesome anatomy pop-up book. Blood covered the embroidered cornflower blue cushions and had sunk into the upholstery, leaking right through to congeal in a pool underneath. The victim's eyes were still open, a stark crystal blue, blank of everything except the pinprick of shock.

Will exhaled heavily and accepted the gloves held out to him, a fine tremor to his movements. By their side, Detective Johnson rubbed at her mouth and surreptitiously turned away to examine corners of the room, bewilderingly free from any evidence of struggle.

"This is similar to the Ripper's kill back in 2007," Crawford murmured at his side, as if Will didn't already know.

His eyes caught on one of the framed documents on the wall.

Will frowned, "She was a psychiatrist?"

"Professor actually," Johnson replied, "Doctor Newman teaches at State."

"Quantico's had her guest lecture on differential psychology," Crawford advised him sotto voce. "She's also written about Abel Gideon before, but they've only communicated by post."

Will curled his mouth in distaste, as if everything were just fine, but he felt his heart pick up speed at the reference to Baltimore State's most notorious escapee. Since Gideon had left the tender loving care of Chilton and Co. he'd racked up a reasonable body count. Jack Crawford didn't know that he had suspicions about Abel Gideon's dramatic escape. The omega eyed Crawford out of the corner of his eye, remembering the voice on the phone.

"You said you wanted me to confirm if it was the Ripper," he murmured under his breath.

"And that's what you're here for," the alpha placated, "It just happens so that new information came up once I was here that this might be related to Gideon."

Will pinched the bridge of his nose and resisted the urge to say something unflattering to the alpha.

"Abel Gideon is a *loose cannon*," he said, voice hard, "I have *kids* to worry about, Jack."

Jack Crawford nodded gravely, "I know, Will, *and* I wouldn't have called you out here if this wasn't important. This is the first time he's struck since March; this is our chance, Will, before he slips away again."

Exhaling sharply, he turned his back on the man and ran a hand through his hair, giving the appearance of someone weighing up the pros and cons. *You owe me*, his body language said – *you owe me, alpha, for not doing your job and keeping me safe.*

In the window of the study, the dark reflection of Jack Crawford opened his mouth to back down, to apologize, to give an out, and then just as quickly closed it, eyes flicking guiltily off

to the side.

“I need some privacy.”

The FBI set them up in a motel over in the next neighborhood, a throw’s away from an interstate that led down southward. If Will opened up the window in his bathroom, he could see a river of vehicle lights flowing rapidly off in the distance, partially hidden by the trees. The blare of the TV could be heard through the thin motel walls despite the motel's sign promising a good sleep, and he supposed he was just glad he wasn’t sharing with someone. There’s no room service but Tomas had been home when he’d been packing his bag, and had very sweetly thrown together a packed meal of cold cuts, cheese, olives and bread for him, fretting that Dad might starve on the road.

His chuckles died off as he opened up his travel case.

Will picked up the bottle of whiskey and considered it for a moment. He had purchased it at the airport before he’d even registered what he was doing, mentally braced against the upcoming crime scene and already dreading the aftermath.

The omega set the bottle down on the nightstand and ignored the complimentary glasses on the sideboard.

Suddenly exhausted, Will undid his holster, double-checked the safety and placed his weapon on the sideboard. Shoes toed off, he dug into the pocket of his coat for his phone as he sprawled out on the worn double bed.

“Will,” the alpha greeted on the first ring, that distinctive voice calming something inside of him. He exhaled on a breath he didn’t know he was holding and closed his eyes.

“Hey,” he smiled, “Sorry did I interrupt anything?”

“Not at all. I was thinking about you,” Hannibal replied. The sound of the sheets rustling as the alpha shifted in bed could be heard in the background, “Have you eaten?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, because *of course* that would be the first question asked, “it was delicious. How was bedtime?”

Will drifted between sleeping and waking as the alpha told him about how Tomas had stepped up in the kitchen and later helped blow-dry Eli’s freshly-washed hair, so that Hannibal could perform Daddy’s usual rituals of bath and story time. There were going to be two birthdays coming up, one for Riley, Eli’s *other* best friend besides Victoria, and another for a girl that Micah knew from his very exclusive preschool; Hannibal knew the parents, and apparently, so did Will. There was a conference in California that the alpha was thinking of attending; maybe they should make a weekend of it, bring the children, enjoy some warm

weather before the winter chill. He hummed an assent and reminded the alpha to remind him when he got home and found himself asking if Hannibal had remembered to use the scentless body lotion and double-checking that the alpha had put Junior to bed with Doctor Panda.

“Shall we see you home tomorrow?” Hannibal asked.

There’s an edge of possessiveness to Hannibal’s question, though it’s said with perfect nonchalance. Will smiled and made a noncommittal sound, knowing that it would drive the alpha crazy and shook off his drowsiness as he changed the subject to something that had been prodding at the back of his mind all evening, “Have you met Abel Gideon before?”

“As a patient?”

“Hmm-hmm.”

“No, but we were acquainted.”

Will frowned, “You knew him back then…? Before…?”

“I knew him by reputation. Then when Frederick attended one of my dinners, I had the opportunity to discuss his diagnosis.”

His free hand flexed as he felt the sudden urge to reach out and touch Hannibal through the distance between them. Hannibal preferred not to talk about it, but he knew his husband had leaned on his old friendship with Chilton to gain unlimited visitor privileges, that the alpha had visited everyday even as he juggled caring for the children, his practice and dealing with the FBI investigations.

“We finally met when he requested it.”

Will’s eyes opened in surprise, his train of thought derailed. “Why?”

He could almost hear the shrug as Hannibal pursed his lips to wet them, the tell-tale sign that he was about to reveal something delicate and he wasn’t sure how the omega would take it. Will struggled upright, uncomfortably alert.

“He had reservations regarding your treatment.”

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn’t that.

Abel Gideon had murdered his omega and her family at Thanksgiving, leaving a bloody mess through what had once been a finely decorated dining room. No one had been able to defend themselves much less escape, their flesh, blood and brain weighed down by expensive Argentine wines liberally-laced with tranquilizers. It had been a slaughter, some kind of psychotic break and left the alpha half-broken, a docile, contrite model patient. It made the abrupt descent into a killing spree that ended in ten deaths and one attempted murder all the more curious.

“You once interviewed him ,” Hannibal reminded him gently.

“I read the report.”

He *had* interviewed Abel Gideon. They had also been neighbors for a period down in the bowels of Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, forced into therapy together by Chilton out of professional irony or perhaps a lack of imagination, before Gideon had made a break for it.

Had they been ‘pals’? It was a strange thought.

“Then you know what he’s accused of.”

Considering the timeline of events, his brain had already caught fire by the time he was brought in to consult on Abel Gideon’s case – there was no telling what state he’d been in when giving his verdict. He could have been wrong. Unlikely, but considering what Will knew of pre-amnesia him, that Will Graham might have had reason to mislead the FBI.

Over the phone, Hannibal took a deep breath. “I had warned Frederick at the time to tread carefully with Gideon. Evidently my warning came too late.”

Too late? Maybe it had just spurred Chilton on.

According to the official recount, Abel Gideon had escaped during a transfer to court, saving Frederick Chilton from what could have been a very public humiliation, and proceeded to murder his way through his psychiatrists, culminating in his vivisection of Chilton in the man’s own office during a suspiciously well-timed blackout, his equivalent of shitting on the man’s porch – and an important life lesson that the head psychiatrist of Baltimore State had been sorely lacking in Will’s opinion; poke around a psychopath’s mind, you’re bound to get poked back.

After extensive peacocking for the Ripper, Gideon had abruptly dropped off the grid. There were a few sightings, several homicides believed to be his handiwork, and now Doctor Newman’s desecrated corpse. Short of Ripper leads to pursue, Jack Crawford had made Gideon's recapture into another one of his vendettas. The general FBI didn’t much care if Gideon was the Ripper or just thought he was and rightly focused more on the alpha being a danger to the public.

So far, most held the assertion that the disgraced transplant surgeon was his own separate creature, that he was delusional – the man was reportedly narcissist and being known at the most elusive of serial killers was an irresistible ego-boost.

Was that what Chilton did, he wondered, appealed to the alpha’s narcissism by convincing him he was the Ripper?

“Will?”

Will opened his eyes and blinked at the tired mid-nineties decor that greeted him. In his ear, Hannibal asked if he wanted to talk about the case, or if he wanted to get some rest now.

“Sorry,” he ran a hand across his face, wincing, “I should get some sleep. I’m probably going to be up early, to walk through the scene again before clean up arrives.”

His husband made a noise of understanding. Taking a deep breath, Will lay back on the bed and imagined himself back home in the bedroom, with the alpha’s hair loose and half-golden in the low accent lights built in over the head of the bed; that unguarded drowsy gaze, lingering over Will’s face as though he didn’t see it every day; as if he was drinking it in as they lay there together going over their day, their schedules, the latest hilarious thing that one of the children had said, all funnelled into soft intimate murmurs.

On the phone, Hannibal wished him goodnight and extracted a promise for Will to call him tomorrow when he could.

Will ended the call only after the alpha had hung up, then rolled over onto his back to stare at the ceiling.

It’s dark and cold in the motel room when he woke in the middle of the night, unsettled. Sitting up, he surveyed the small room, a quiet sense of dread nipping at his chilled flesh. He studied the tired nondescript wallpaper, the fake walnut sideboard that was both the TV stand and a desk, his gun and holster still there exactly where he’d put them, the outdated armchair in the corner that looked like it had been bought from the same mid-nineties furniture catalogue used by banks and government departments.

Outside, heavy, almost dragging footsteps passed by his room.

Sliding off the bed, he crossed the threadbare carpet and quietly opened the door. Moonlight spilled across the bare cement walkway, cut up neatly into piano keys of alternating pales and darks by the banisters.

The beast disappeared around the corner, hoofs clicking ominously.

Will opened his eyes, confused only for a second that he was back in bed before he realized something was off.

Coming fully awake, he stiffened at the unmistakable sound of someone else breathing, before realizing what had unsettled him from sleep in the first place: the smell of an alpha, but acrid, altered and wrong somehow. It was faint, hidden under the clean smell of soap and expensive deodorants, but it struck Will’s own finely-tuned omega senses like a blaring horn. Holding still and modulating his breathing, Will tried to remember which motel rooms the others had been given, if any of them would be close enough to hear him through the thin walls. His hand slithered towards his phone, still where he left it under his pillow, and hoped desperately that he was correctly recalling the emergency quick-dial for Beverly Katz’s cell.

“I know what you’re thinking,” a familiar voice drawled, “It’s rude to stare.”

Heart pounding and movements slow to the point caricature, Will gave up the pretence of sleep and sat up to confront his midnight intruder, taking it as an opportunity to stuff his phone under his thigh. A quick glance at the sideboard revealed that his gun was still in the

same place, untouched. Even with this reassurance, he kept his guard up; his uninvited guest was a cutter, not a shooter.

“Doctor Gideon,” he greeted.

“*Mister* Graham,” the owner of the mysterious voice on the phone parroted back just as gravely, “It’s been too long.”

“I can’t say.”

“Yes,” the ex-surgeon shot him a wry look, “you can’t, can you?”

Will responded with a bland smile.

Clean-shaven and neatly dressed in a navy jacket and tan trousers, the fifty-four year old appeared unaffected by the rigors of life on the run. Possessing an astute and cool gaze, there’s a certainty to his movements that would have drawn Will’s eye even if the older man had been standing in the middle of a crowd. Legs crossed at the ankles, Abel Gideon was the picture of idleness. He hadn’t come here with any intentions to hurt Will – no, it would take a different mental state to convince him to hurt an omega, but then who knew.

“Belated congratulations on the exoneration – though really,” the disgraced alpha tutted at him, clearly amused, “perhaps deception would be the better term for it.”

“You seem to know a lot about me.”

Shifting back to rest against the bed head and crossing his leg at the ankles, Will mirrored his intruder’s serenity even as his heart continued to gallop within the confines of his ribcage.

“Oh but there’s so much more to know. You had me fooled, you know – you had them all fooled,” slate-blue eyes flicked to the wrinkled jacket flung haphazardly over the foot of the bed. “Going by that badge you’ve got tucked in your inner breast pocket, the farce continues.”

Will ignored his growing sense of alarm as he returned Abel Gideon’s friendly regard. He had only been incarcerated for three-months but he knew that it would have only taken a week of watching the carts go by and Chilton’s droning to give into the man’s persistent questions – Gideon struck him as a talker – and despite being psychotic, the alpha was no idiot.

“Now, I get my own madness,” Abel Gideon pursed his lips, brows furrowed in bemusement, “But I must admit, I haven’t quite figured out yours.”

He didn’t bother to hide his incredulity; the ex-surgeon had had over two years to satisfy his curiosity, it made no sense for him to show up here and now, to get re-acquainted when a dozen members of the FBI were sleeping in the surrounding motel rooms.

The alpha gave a low-raspy chuckle, reading his face; “I would have called sooner but my new psychiatrist recommended a sea change. What did he say… Ah yes, someone who already doubts their own identity can be more susceptible to manipulation.”

New psychiatrist? Will wondered what happened to the poor guy after that session was done. Beneath his thigh, his phone began to softly buzz, the vibration travelling through his tense form like a sharp sting.

"You manipulated me," the alpha advised him matter-of-factly.

"Did I?" He swallowed, mouth-dry, as his phone went still. Less than two minutes, he wagered.

Gideon's mouth quirked in a tiny smile. "Don't look so worried, Mister Graham. I forgive you your trespasses. In fact, you did me a favor."

Had he? Will kept quiet, even as he noticed a flicker in the light underneath his door.

"You told me to give them a taste of their own medicine," Gideon chuckled, "Dare I say, it was exactly what the doctor ordered!"

Will inhaled sharply as suddenly, the gleam in Abel Gideon's eyes extrapolated itself into a suspicion and then into an idea, seemly exploding into being within the recesses of his mindscape fully-realized and startling in its implications.

If Gideon was telling the truth, that was.

Was he?

Will took one deep breath and then another as the knowledge raced through the length of his body and settled heavily in his stomach.

It fit the timeline, he conceded. Abel Gideon had killed the nurse back in October, had been exposed to the idea that he'd been misled to believe he was the Chesapeake Ripper then; yet the ex-transplant surgeon had never brought up the idea of suing Chilton until December, several long weeks after Will had been put in the cell next to him.

It was the one thing that had struck him about Abel Gideon's escape when he had gone through the file several months ago – how well-timed it had been, the orchestration, the decisions that had to have been made, all by a man who didn't even know who he was. There had been three men in that transport van, all trained and all well-aware of the dangers; yet somehow, their prisoner had slipped his cuffs and killed them all with plenty of time to put on a show. Then the psychiatrists had started to drop.

The FBI had looked but the ex-surgeon hadn't written any manifesto to explain his actions. All his correspondences had been confiscated and thoroughly searched, but it had all been for naught; there had been no secret communiqués or coded messages written in bodily fluids within the pages of interview requests, general fan mail and marriage proposals.

There had been nothing to find as the planner had been right there all along, hiding in plain sight, in the cell adjacent to Gideon's –whatever the plan was, it had been all in Gideon's head, sown there by hours upon hours of meandering chatter. Chilton might have suggested

to Gideon that he was the Ripper, but someone else had told him to take back his identity, one body part at a time.

Will turned his attention to the older man, and frowned as he thought back to the phone call several weeks ago, his mind suddenly jammed full with questions. He had so many missing pieces from his puzzle, and there was only so much extrapolation he could do from the evidence he allowed into his office and home – all of which undoubtedly had been vetted to be ordinary, circumstantial.

Maybe Abel Gideon even knew the *other* Butcher.

Now, *that* was a secret he would eagerly owe a favor for.

There was a jarring bang as his door split open under the booted kick of Jack Crawford. FBI officers flooded the cramped motel room, guns out. Will flinched despite having expected the invasion.

“Doctor Gideon,” Jack Crawford growled from behind the barrel of his shotgun, “I need you to put your hands behind your head and get on the ground.”

The scent of coffee, heavy and bitterly fragrant, invaded Will’s consciousness, pulling him out of a dream where he was driving down a lonely Virginian highway on his way to something or other and into the bedroom. For a second he was confused, before he registered the long drawn out sound of liquid being poured and the last twenty-four hours came back to him. The interstate flight. Abel Gideon. Beverly Katz standing next to the ambulance doors, face washed sickly-pale by the LED lights as the paramedics checked Will over. Coming home on the red eye. Junior’s wide-eyed bewilderment at having a visitor so early in the morning for all of a second before he's running to welcome Daddy home in his pajamas and Hannibal whispering in his ear that he looked exhausted, ordering him to take a shower and get some sleep and stop worrying; Marie would be all to happy to take Junior on her errands to give him some time.

Will took a deep breath and finally opened his eyes. That had been hours ago, going by the lack of sunlight against the far wall. A familiar caress against his shoulder had him leaning back into the touch, making a sound of discontent when it disappeared after only a few seconds.

Rolling over onto his back, he smiled lazily at the alpha, who took a seat on the edge of the bed and leaned in to kiss him.

“Smells delicious,” he murmured sleepily.

Hannibal chuckled and nuzzled his jaw, scenting his omega with clear satisfaction. “Let’s hope it tastes equally good.”

“What are we having?”

“Protein scramble,” Hannibal smiled softly and stole another kiss before he got up to fetch the serving tray from where he’d left it on the ottoman.

Will blinked as a warm bloom of recognition ignited in his stomach as he took in the omelette made of sausage and peppers, the perfectly crisp rice fritters rounding out the plate, all framed by polished oyster shells of salt and Tabasco. There’s also a dish of seasonal fruits set to the side for ending the meal. It’s perfect, exactly what he’s in the mood for, and Will glanced up to thank the alpha before flushing at the intensity of Hannibal’s unguarded affection, somehow still flustered though it's been a year.

Hannibal had decided to come home after his first appointment of the morning, and had promptly diverted his other morning patient to the late afternoon. It’s completely unnecessary, *coddling*, but Will could only bite back a sigh as he ate, trying to ignore Hannibal’s alpha content in providing sustenance for him.

It’s a rare occasion that saw them both home without the children to attend to, and so he’s not surprised when Hannibal’s clothes end up draped over the ottoman along with the dirty dishes.

So close to their first heat together in years, he's a bouquet of temptation to the alpha, just as the weight of Hannibal over the spread of his hips made him buck up for more, his sex both wet and hard, eager for friction and attention. They made love lavishly, slowly, trying to draw out the pleasure; and Will’s perhaps too amused by his forty-seven year old husband’s enthusiasm for what was essentially the alpha ducking out from work for sex during his lunch break. Despite the fact there was no one in the house to hear them, they’re used to staying quiet, too busy kissing, sucking and nipping every bit of skin they could get their lips on to make more than soft grunts, moans and the occasional whimper.

In the aftermath, Will allowed himself to tucked into the alpha’s side, his limbs loose and pliable from the surge of endorphins. He’s almost half-asleep when his husband broke the silence.

“Elizabeta asked me this morning if she could have a baby sister for Christmas,” Hannibal shared, murmuring the words into the crown of his omega’s hair.

Will blinked in surprise, before glancing up into the alpha’s face, skeptical that this was a real conversation being referred to and not just some hypothetical scenario. Did a seven-year old even know where babies came from? Dubious, Will huffed in amusement and returned to his pillow, a space between Hannibal’s shoulder and chest that he liked best.

“What’d you tell her?”

“Ask your dad,” Hannibal replied deadpan.

Will laughed into the older man's collar. His husband smiled back, shamelessly cheerful, and leaned in to kiss him soundly. When they finally part for air, Will regarded the alpha fondly and kissed the man's shoulder as he lay back down.

"The previous sales pitch was better," he whispered.

It's not a new notion, the idea of adding to the family. They were professionally and financially secure, and there was certainly enough room in the house. For all that he might complain that having another child would be a strain, subsequently affecting the time and effort they could spend on all the children, Will knew his argument fell flat. The Lecter household ran effectively under Marie's competent attentions, and his work? Truthfully, he'd started to get the sense recently that his teaching post was more about the FBI keeping him on their payroll.

"Hmm," Hannibal conceded drowsily and twirled a finger through his husband's curls. "Are they expecting you back soon?"

"The BAU?"

The alpha made a noise of affirmation.

"Aren't you glad I'm back?"

Hannibal chuckled and nuzzled his hair, "Yes, was it not obvious?"

Will felt his mouth quirk up at the corners, helpless in the face of that charm.

"When you told me, I was expecting the trip would last at least twenty-four hours with Uncle Jack at the helm."

He shrugged, "There wasn't anything to do."

There was a beat of skeptical silence.

"I heard from Miss Katz that you caught Abel Gideon."

"I don't know if you could call it that," he replied vaguely shaking his head, more to himself than anything, and combed his fingers through the grey bit of Hannibal's chest hair, lost in thought.

Hannibal nosed lazily against his hair, "You seem perplexed."

"He just," Will paused, trying to find the right words, "...gave himself up."

"Gideon?"

Will nodded, a faint frown crooking his lips. Abel Gideon was back in custody, yes but he hadn't caught him – there had been no 'catching' of any kind. The man had surrendered.

"I think…he thinks we're friends."

Will tensed in expectation as Hannibal took a beleaguered breath, anticipating the alpha's disapproval, both as his mate and as a psychiatrist, but to his bewilderment, the older man made a strangled noise of agreement in his throat and said, "Yes, I suspect he does, in his own manner."

Startled, the omega frowned but before he could ask, Hannibal continued; "When he requested to meet with me, Frederick was kind enough to approve the request, under the impression that it was an official query; that perhaps Gideon was finally willing to consider therapy again."

The alpha paused, exhaling heavily as he pressed a tender kiss to Will's brow. Wishing to comfort his husband, he slid his hand from Hannibal's ribs downwards, soothing the alpha with strokes through his happy trail.

"He told me that he was concerned with the conditions of your sentencing. That he'd noticed symptoms but suspected they were not signs of a relapse, but were something entirely other."

The omega held his tongue as his mind expanded with the new inrush of information. As he silently mulled over this new piece of data, Will found himself recalling an event recorded in Gideon's file; how during a power surge the entire facility's electronically-controlled doors had malfunctioned and Gideon had pulled Alana Bloom into his cell to protect her. Alana had proposed that these weren't the actions of the Chesapeake Ripper, while his notations deemed otherwise; *the Ripper might*, his addendum stated, *nothing is more ugly to him than undignified discourteous behavior*.

Hannibal shifted onto his side and threw an arm over him, holding him close, "He's going to request you interview him, with Uncle Jack's support."

"It's not like he can force the issue."

"Not force, no - but he'll certainly mislead, connive, manipulate everyone and anyone around him to get what he wants. When it comes to how far someone can stretch the truth, I assure you, Abel Gideon is a master."

Will nestled deeper into the alpha's embrace, and smiled weakly; "I know."

The Past: January 2014

Throwing himself through the doors, covered in blood still lukewarm after their abrupt exit, the escapee stumbled to an abrupt stop, uncertain what to make of the scene before him. Cocking an eyebrow, he looked from the guard with the very flexible neck laying prostrate upon the hard snow-packed earth to the well-dressed alpha gentleman standing over him, hair combed back in a severe coif. This alpha, a younger man whose face he recognized immediately, was adjusting his leather gloves. The gloves were black, expensive-looking, like

the rest of his outfit but they had a funny detail about them – the trim was quite furry and frankly, in his humble opinion, reminded him of the pompoms of a shaved poodle.

“Good day,” the man greeted.

He frowned the rapidly cooling corpse at the man’s foot and felt a twinge of consternation that out of all his expectations, this had not been one of them; he was losing his touch.

“Doctor,” he said, incredulous at his unexpected ally, “Out of curiosity, does your lovely husband know about your extracurricular activities?”

Doctor Hannibal Lecter smiled genially and didn't answer him.

“I hadn’t intended for our second meeting to be here, but circumstances have forced my hand.”

“I see,” Abel Gideon replied evenly – because truly, he could see, and as long as the man didn’t get in his way, frankly, he didn’t care; he gestured towards the dead driver, because dear God, he was cold. “If you don’t mind…”

“Oh not at all,” the husband of Will Graham put up his hands and stepped away.

“Thank you,” Abel Gideon replied, genuinely grateful, and began to strip himself of his blood-splattered hospital-issue jacket and giving his face and hands a good wipe down, before crouching down to divest the dead driver of his nice, clean, *warm* parka.

“It’s a terrible thing,” the other alpha continued, “To have your identity taken from you.”

“Funny,” he smirked as he worked, “your husband told me the exact same thing – right before he shared with me a trick to get out of handcuffs.”

Will Graham’s husband smiled back, clearly proud of his omega’s altruism, then casually checked his watch. “What are your plans now, Doctor?”

Zipping up his new parka with a little noise of satisfaction, Abel Gideon tucked his rather cold hands into the fleece-lined pockets with relish, “*Well*, I’m hoping to visit my psychiatrists, and show my thanks for all the care they’ve shown me in this difficult and trying time.”

The alpha nodded once, as if making up his mind; “Doctor Paul Carruthers was one of your psychiatrists, was he not?”

He threw the man a calculating look. “Yes, Doctor Carruthers,” he said slowly, wondering where this was going.

“I know where he works, I can take you to him.”

Abel Gideon narrowed his eyes, and wondered if his eyebrows were as astonished as he was. There was such a thing as not looking a gift horse in the mouth… And yet, the question had to be asked: “Why are you doing this?”

The man turned and began to cross the road. It wasn't clear if he was expected to follow, but he followed anyway, intrigued.

“You were determined to know the Chesapeake Ripper, Doctor Gideon. To wear that skin before you die.” Hannibal Lecter inhaled the sharp wintry air, then smiled, “Now is your opportunity.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, thanks all for waiting patiently while I got myself sorted - and thank you so so much for all the feedback and encouragement
I want to esp mention Kyuu, Septima and Eclectic
My arm is still receiving TLC and I get tired typing, or weird pulling sensations, but more or less I have full functionality - hallelujah :D fic on!

Tramezzino

Chapter Summary

In the pursuit of information about Abel Gideon, Will joins Alana on her crusade to save Peter Bernadone.

Chapter Notes

Unbetad. I made Chilton say something hilarious. Laugh with me.
I wrote most of this chapter completely off my head with sleep deprivation
(I usually post then correct, so there will likely be changes to wording etc)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frederick Chilton picked up his wine lazily. “It’s been good to see him, *well*,” he sniffed, glowering for his captive audience, “I should rephrase – it’s good to see him, *in a cell*, where he belongs.”

Will glanced up vacantly from the table centrepiece, an elaborate tangle of small white-skinned gourds dressed whimsically with wild flowers and vegetation, and blinked at the alpha. Averting his gaze from Chilton’s attempt to catch his eye, Will looked to the doorway that led to the kitchen, silently urging Hannibal to return. Seated to his right, Alana Bloom took a sip of wine, a faint frown crooking her mouth as she stared back into her colleague’s scowling face. Having left straight from court, the beta’s hair was pinned up. Coincidentally both psychiatrists were in Glen Check suits tonight, and seated opposite one another down the stretch of the table, their profiles seemed to merge.

“I’m just grateful he was brought in without a loss of life,” she said, turning to give Will a warm smile.

“Hmmm, *yes*!” Chilton said around his gulp of French burgundy, turning from his study of the wine label to raise his glass, “I call a toast – to the BAU and our Will, for recapturing a monster and putting an end to his reign of terror.”

Alana Bloom didn’t move to join in, brows furrowed as she patiently watched the alpha drink to his own salutations. Not for the first time, Will wondered how the two remained friends; the beta clearly suspected that the professionalism displayed Chilton as nothing but a veneer for the alpha’s criminally flexible sense of ethics.

“I’m curious myself, how did you get him to come quietly?” Chilton asked distractedly, more interested in the delicately constructed *gunkan nigiri*-style canapés, protein-free, which dotted the crystal side plate. Picking up one of the tiny morsels, the man studied the thinly-sliced zucchini wrapping curiously, sniffed at the fronds of pea greens, mizuna and cilantro that flared out from the small mound of rice like a tiny bouquet before popping the entire thing into his mouth, chewing enthusiastically.

Will took a sip of wine to hide his disdain, “I’m more curious why the FBI put Gideon back into your care; you lost him once.”

Chilton let out a false little laugh; Will didn’t miss the twitch in the man’s fingers or the withering twist of the man’s mouth as he turned to address him.

“Technically,” the psychiatrist flashed him a supercilious smile, “the judiciary system of the State of Maryland lost him, but yes, I understand your concern; the man is a true sociopath, it is so rare to recapture one alive after an escape.”

“I was surprised too,” Alana commented, “I mean, considering your history.”

Will’s eyes drifted to the silvery-tip of the alpha’s cane as Chilton reached out and fiddled with it. The beta caught the motion too, and visibly softened in sympathy – which was lapped up like fine wine. Will narrowed his eyes.

“Oh,” Chilton sighed with gusto, “Dealing with the man gives me a visceral chill to the guts–”

“Literally.”

Well, what’s left of them.

The psychiatrist shot a flinty look out of the corner of his eye.

“Anyway,” he continued primly, smoothing a hand down his tie, “As I understand it, due to my long history of cooperating with the FBI, it was considered best for Gideon to be transferred back into my care. After all, who besides myself knows the risks of harboring such a monster.”

“And I for one feel safer knowing that Abel Gideon is back in therapy with a good psychiatrist,” Entering the room with a long covered tray, Hannibal smiled with envious charm, instantly shifting the stilted atmosphere; “I hope everyone is hungry.”

“Starved,” Chilton beamed, shaking out his napkin as his eyes avidly followed the motions of his host’s hands at the sideboard, the unveiling of the feast.

“We can’t have that,” Hannibal chuckled, and placed a plate down in front of Alana with a flourish before rounding the table to serve his fellow alpha, “Salted and ash-baked celeriac with foraged sea astra. Frederick, you have tested me. It is rare that I cook a meatless meal.”

The man shrugged, “I lost a kidney.”

“It looks delicious,” Alana smiled brightly up at her ex-mentor.

Frederick Chilton made agreeing noises, knife and fork already in hand and impatient for the alpha to be seated so that they might eat. By the way he was grinning ear to ear, he was enjoying the night and already imagining the bragging rights that he’ll have come tomorrow – he’d whip out his phone for a photo or two if it wouldn’t be considered déclassé – to be one of the few trusted enough by an alpha of Hannibal Lecter’s calibre to warrant an invitation to a *private* dinner party.

Giving an intimate smile of encouragement to his husband as he served the omega, Hannibal did a second round of the table, swapping out used wine glasses and serving the paired vintage, before finally settling at the head of the table.

For awhile the discussion drifted away from Gideon to the two Michelin-star restaurant in Notting Hill, London, where Hannibal had encountered the dish that had inspired tonight’s main, then onto the court case which necessitated Alana dressing up for the week, before the conversation finally returned to the most recently admitted patient of Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Will focused studiously on his plate throughout, turning a blind eye to Chilton’s ham-fisted attempts to elicit debate, with the occasional glance to the head of the table, sharing smiles with his husband as though they were the only two present. He ate as nimbly as Hannibal, savoring every mouthful even as their guests began to debate whether or not it was back on the table, that Abel Gideon *might* be the Chesapeake Ripper.

Alana shook her head, “The Chesapeake Ripper is always methodical, meticulous. Which is why he’s so hard to catch. From the start, Gideon has been impulsive, almost obvious in his motives.”

“Even so,” Chilton smiled cheerfully, “He’s a psychopath of some value – his actions speak for themselves.”

If Gideon was a ‘psychopath’ at all – Will took a drink to quell his tongue – since no respectable psychiatrist have used terms like ‘psychopath’ or ‘sociopath’ since 1968. Alana Bloom crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at the head psychiatrist of Baltimore State, unimpressed; the man didn’t notice, absorbed in his meal.

“How are your interviews proceeding?” Hannibal asked, looking between his two guests with polite interest.

Chilton opened his mouth to reply but Alana spoke first; “They’re not,” she admitted honestly, frustrated. “We initially thought to do separate interviews – compare and contrast – but besides small talk, Gideon’s refused to speak to us at all.”

“But it’s only a matter of time,” Chilton added hastily.

Alana shot her colleague an unreadable look before turning her attention to her hosts, splitting her warm regard between the couple seated at opposing heads of the table, “I hate to eat and run but as you know, I’m expected at court bright and early.”

“Of course,” Hannibal rose to his feet with her, holding up a finger, “But if you’ll give me a moment, I’ve already packed your dessert in anticipation.”

The beta chuckled, “Hannibal, you shouldn’t have.”

“Ah but I always do.”

The two long-time friends laughed.

Will stood as Alana came over to kiss him goodbye, wondering if it would be crass to suggest that Hannibal stay here to keep Chilton company while *he* walked Alana to the door.

Silence engulfed the room in the wake of her departure.

The remaining psychiatrist turned back to his wine and took a long drink as he proceeded to polish off the canapés.

“I don’t know what happened between you and Gideon,” Chilton said casually, “but he’s refused to speak to anyone except you.”

Will stiffened mid-bite at the unsubtle once-over he was subjected to.

“You spent a lot of time with him at the hospital, a lot of one-on-one time…” Chilton murmured, his gaze turning speculative as he reclaimed his professional smile, not realizing that the dilation of his pupils gave him away; “I would welcome any insight you have to offer.”

Will blinked, speechless at what the man had implied – and experienced a dizzying swell of revulsion as his glance pierced past Frederick Chilton’s earnest facade to the alpha’s secret proclivities; that bad habit of watching pornography at the office when he should be working, his moral ease with spying on his patient’s intimate moments. Will wasn’t sure what was worse, that Chilton was conscious of what he was saying and trying to infuriate him, or that the psychiatrist was truly *that* ignorant of how insulting his words were.

He stared back at the man for a long beat and imagined in great, glorious and bloody detail stabbing Frederick Chilton in the eyeball with his fork.

“You’re his favorite topic of conversation. Not with me or Alana, of course, but with anyone else who’ll listen. Will Graham and his lovely husband, blah, blah, blah, that you’re the first good conversation he’s had in ages,” Chilton paused meaningfully, “how you’re such good friends.”

Will stood, flinching at the screech of his chair legs against the floor, “Excuse me,” he exhaled with false calm, “I’m needed upstairs.”

Turning on his heel, the omega stalked away and practically flew up the steps to the nursery, his control tittering on the edges from annoyance into homicidal intent. In the tiny bedroom lit only by a nightlight that cast silhouettes of flying pigs, Will slumped into the corner armchair and scrubbed at his scowling face. The worst thing, he decided as he sat there watching the sweet rise and fall of his two-year old son’s chest, was that *he* had asked

Hannibal to organize tonight's dinner, to smooth over any leftover ire Chilton held towards their last encounter and gain access to Gideon without going through FBI channels. And it was working, Will knew – *Frederick* was having a great time tonight – he just had to finish the evening without slamming the man's head against the table.

Taking a deep fortifying breath, Will stood and descended the stairs.

"…I wouldn't believe anything he says – I mean, honestly, the man is delusional," He heard as he rounded the door way into the dining room.

At the head of the table, Hannibal stood with a relieved smile, buttoning up his jacket as he left his seat to guide Will back to the omega's place setting, pulling out the chair for him with rather unnecessary ceremony. It was gratifying however to see Chilton's ugly sputter and the uncomfortable jealousy that the small gesture elicited.

"As I was saying, the man is clearly delusional," the psychiatrist gave a weak smile, struggling to regain his mien of adroitness, "If you believe what he says, dear Will here is a monster, and so are you."

Color drained from Will's face at the pronouncement. He fumbled for his wine glass.

Sitting back down at his head of the table, Hannibal chuckled good-naturedly, his genuine enjoyment what of Will considered a very poor joke dispelling any possible tensions; "Only when I haven't slept in forty-eight hours," the alpha teased, throwing an affectionate look down the length of the table, "if you believe my dear husband."

Chilton beamed, chest-puffed up with alcohol-greased bravado and filled with a grandiose opinion of his own wit; the man poured himself another glass of wine. Somehow, Will managed to eke out a smile.

"Well, Frederick," Hannibal tipped his glass at the man, "you've survived dinner with a family of psychopathic murderers. Congratulations."

Frederick Chilton raised his glass with a grin, his level of smarm and self-satisfaction almost toxic enough to choke on. "You only live once."

Will eyed the vintage Jaguar in red puce parked ostentatiously out the front of the building, and watched a delivery truck disappear around the corner to the loading bay. It was overcast today, matching his dour mood, and the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane seemed extra forbidding despite its Beaux-Arts facade. Two white-clad orderlies exited the front doors, one in a navy jacket and the other in a bright green parka. He watched them as they crossed the road and ducked between two cars to have a smoke break.

If he was going to see Gideon today, and make it back in time for the end of naptime for Junior… Will gripped the door handle, sweat prickling at the nape of his neck; he imagined himself heading inside, going through security, being patted down, being accosted by Chilton, taken door by door through to wherever they kept their most dangerous–

Will flinched at the double-rap on his car window.

Alana Bloom shot him a wry look from behind her violet scarf, “Hi.”

Exhaling, Will ran a hand across his face and got out of the car, trying to smile. “Aren’t you supposed to still be in court?”

“Court let out early.”

“Ah,” he breathed, rewinding his mind back to recall what the court case was for; “Verdict?” he asked, half-interested.

“Guilty,” Alana advised him. Looking a little perplexed, she gave him a curious smile; “I would have expected you to be busy at home today. Do you have an appointment?”

“Just visiting,” he deflected, “What are you doing here?”

“Guess I was waiting for you,” she teased, then nodded to the hospital entrance, “Come on, I’ll walk you in.”

Inhaling deeply and trying to hide his reluctance, Will thrust his clenched hands deep into his pockets and fell into step with her.

“Are you here for something specific?”

Looking as though she were troubled by how much she should reveal, Alana admitted after a beat, “I’m here to see a patient, Peter Bernadone; you won’t know him.”

Will racked his mind, and wondered where it was that he’d read that name; it seemed familiar. Turning it over in his head, he faltered mid-step as he recalled the case she was referring.

He cleared his throat, “Woman found dead inside of a horse?”

If she’s surprised by his awareness of the case in question, she didn’t show it.

“That’s right,” Alana smiled sadly, and stopped just short of the front steps of the hospital. “I didn’t realize you were interested.”

Will shrugged, “I read; Blackbriar Stables case, isn’t it? January 2014?”

The beta breathed in sharply as a gust of wind tore past them, eyes haunted with her own recollections.

“Stable master found one of their mares dead, noticed that the caesarean had been resewn,” Will recited, “discovered with the body of Sarah Craber, horse groomer, reported missing by her family six days prior. She had been strangled; examiners discovered a live bird within her chest, inserted down her throat post-mortem.”

All while he had been still been confined to his hospital bed at the Mercy Hospital, newly released from his tiny cell at the BSHCI and five-months along in the pregnancy. Alana touched his arm, reading his distracted look as distress. Will turned towards the solid doors of the hospital and forced himself to keep walking.

“Is this for an article?”

She looked away to the side – guilt, he read, frustration, sadness, and not a little disdain, though its less clear whether that’s directed at herself or someone else. She hunched her shoulders, bracing against the chill. “I’m not sure there’s anything to write about – in fact, I’m not even sure the case was really settled,” she said, carefully neutral.

Will raised an eyebrow, “I thought it was open and shut.”

“Therein lays the problem,” she muttered with uncharacteristic ire, her smile bleak.

“There was so much going on during that time what with Gideon escape and everything surrounding, well, your case,” she breathed in hotly and shot him an apologetic look, “the entire investigation was frankly rushed, and the trial a farce, because everyone was too busy trying to save their own political asses.”

“That’s a lot of asses to save,” he noted, equally dry.

Alana Bloom chuckled, the sound feeble yet threaded with anger.

“I actually surprised you even know about the case. I would have thought Archives are under orders to bury it as deep as they can.” At his confused frown, her mouth quirked at the corners, self-deprecating, “I’m not exactly popular in the halls of Quantico right now for demanding a review.”

“I had a vested interest,” He murmured, and then at her concerned look, explained with a sigh, “Micah had recurring nightmares a couple of months ago, overheard an older kid talking about a woman in a dead horse.”

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” the beta grimaced.

Will smiled, a mirthless expression.

Despite her concern for Micah though, it’s clear Alana was disappointed that his knowledge of the case wasn’t related to any official action on the FBI’s part to address her concerns. The period coinciding with his incarceration and release had been a PR nightmare for the FBI, first with the possibility that they had employed a serial killer and then with the public knowledge they had been duped into imprisoning the wrong person. With all that, he wasn’t exactly surprised that some cases had simply been swept under the rug or been bulldozed into

a conviction. It also didn't come as a surprise that Alana Bloom would be pushing for things to be done right.

“Supposedly, he strangled sixteen women.”

“*Supposedly*,” Alana parroted back, “Just like supposedly a one-hundred and twenty-pound beta male, of diminished mental faculties and poor muscle tone, was able to exert over forty-pounds of pressure on the trachea of a one-hundred and thirty-five pound beta female in excellent physical health.”

Entering the outer reception area of the hospital, Will took out his keys, wallet and phone for the security guards and submitted himself to be both scanned and patted down, and even allowed an inspection of his mouth to show that his airways were clear. It’s just short of invasive and left him feeling slightly off balance when he finally reconvened with Alana on the other side.

“Look,” the beta began tentatively, “I know you’re busy but I’d appreciate it if you could speak to Peter, give me your insight.”

Will saw no point in talking around the issue: “You think he’s innocent.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. But something isn’t right, I think he knows something...” The beta sighed expansively, “and that he's suppressing what he knows and substituting it with something else because he's overwhelmed right now... I just need to get him to talk.”

Sensing how important this was for her, Will hesitated for only a moment before nodding. Alana Bloom smiled gratefully.

Peter Bernadone, though considered low-risk, was brought in by an orderly with his hands handcuffed in front of him. Scruffy, with a closely-shorn haircut that did the man no favors by how it highlighted the ugly damage of his skull injury, the beta’s eyes were downcast and his manner nervous as he was escorted in.

“Hi Peter,” Alana murmured with a gentle smile.

“H-hello,” the man greeted timidly, hunched over as he were trying to ignore the psychiatrist.

For a few minutes or so, the two of them chatted as Will sat quietly in the corner, mentally taking notes; the atypical motor response, the obvious signs of poor sleep, the malnourished skeletal limbs. He couldn’t remember if it was in the FBI file, but it seemed that Peter Bernadone's ability to look and touch could only happen as separate events.

“I brought a friend today,” Alana smiled, “His name is Will Graham.”

Will nodded genially when the man looked at him briefly, then twisted around in his chair as if the very sight of the omega terrified him. “You a doctor?”

“Teacher,” he replied.

Bernadone nodded jerkily and went back to staring off to the side.

Sensing an impasse, Alana flipped open her file, removing a slim soft-cover book with bright pictures and words, something that had been published with children in mind. “Peter? Remember last time when we talked about my dog, Apple Sauce?”

Bernadone nodded and gave a twitched as he tried to turn around. The process took two tries, before he retreated to looking away. “Yeah, real nice looking dog you h-have.”

Alana smiled, “I brought you a book, it’s all about dogs. You already know all about birds, right?”

Bernadone twitched; “I like birds,” he agreed, before spinning to face the other side and sliding one hand nervously across the table to take the glossy picture book. Flipping it open with careful reverence, the beta glanced at it, touching the pictures with his bony fingers before looking off to the side, relaxing possibly for the first time since they’d arrived.

“T-thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome,” Alana murmured softly, a faint smile curling the edges of her mouth. “You know, Will here has three dogs.”

There’s an interested glance in his direction, and almost visible shift in Peter Bernadone who appeared to come around to the idea that the stranger in the room couldn’t be that bad, if he was a fellow dog lover.

“You have three dogs?”

Sensing this was his cue, Will stood slowly and joined Alana at the table. Answering the man’s questions about his dogs was simple and drew a smile from him as the omega enjoyed the honest curiosity and delight experienced by the beta. It seemed fairly obvious to him that Peter Bernadone, whatever his involved in the Blackbriar Stables case, wasn’t a killer – it’s less clear whether or not the man had been an accessory, and if he had been involved, how much awareness he’d had of the events. For awhile, he kept the conversation light, but as he’s about to let Alana take over, the interview room door buzzed open.

Alana Bloom frowned, “I have a full hour scheduled with this patient.”

The orderly who interrupted them gave her a small grin, unrepentant, “Sorry, Doctor Bloom, but Doctor Chilton’s asking for you.”

Sighing loudly, the beta muttered that she’d take care of this, and slid her file over. Will tried to stand and follow but she waved for him to stay, to finish the interview. The door closed again and locked itself.

“I didn’t kill anybody,” Bernadone whispered.

Will regarded the beta with a frown. “Excuse me?” He asked, genuinely uncertain if he’d heard that correctly.

Looking furtively around, the beta leaned in nervously and cupping a hand to his mouth, he whispered, “I gave her the bird, I just gave her the bird.”

Keep his expression genial, Will leaned in and lowered his voice, “Peter, do you know what happened to Sarah Craber?”

Going still, the beta looked thoughtfully off to the far corner of the room, “After something so ugly, I just wanted something beautiful for her,” he admitted with a forlorn look, “It’s not fair, not fair.”

“You were grieving her,” Will surmised, as slowly the picture began to form in his mind; opposite him, Peter Bernadone crossed his arms protectively, skittishly bobbing his head along. “You couldn't save her, but you could bring poetry to her death.”

“I wanted them to find me,” Bernadone mumbled, “if you find me, you can find him.”

Him?

Will frowned.

“Peter,” he said in a low-soothing voice, mindful of the delicacy of the beta’s psyche, “tell me who killed her.”

Bernadone glanced at him before his expression shuttered and he quickly retracted into the original pose he’d taken when led into the room; practically twisted around the chair back, as if he were tempted to climb it just to get away.

Will took in the behavior, a marked deterioration from their earlier ease with one another, and felt an ugly sensation in his gut as his mind skipped ahead of all of the evidence.

“Do you have an unwanted shadow, Peter?” He asked, reining in his urgency so as to remain calm lest he spook the beta, “Someone you considered a friend.”

Someone who had made Peter Bernadone feel less alone, someone that the beta had trusted to take care of him, to not abuse the authority given to him either by the state or by Peter himself, to not lead the beta astray. Then Peter had seen what he really was, and the terrifying secret made the beta even more isolated than he already was.

“No one believes me,” Bernadone whispered sadly at the floor, shaking his head, “He'll make sure no one believes me.”

Leaving quickly to avoid running into either Chilton or Alana, Will got into his car and for several long moments, sat there in the silence, hands clamped over the steering wheel.

It could have happened to him, Peter’s fate.

It hadn't but it could have, it could have.

The man had been emotionally terrorized, taken advantage of, *betrayed* – Will scrubbed at his face, the helplessness he'd glimpsed in Peter Bernadone's sad brown eyes slamming right through his lower plexus *and twisting*.

(In an alternate universe though…)

If Hannibal had moved on during the six-months that he had been unable to function, sometimes reasonable about the fact he couldn't remember how he ended up mid-conversation with the stranger claiming to be a doctor, sometimes hysterical about the fact that he wasn't allowed to leave with his husband who was insistent that he had a memory problem when he remembered everything up to leaving the house for a drive to Rappahannock and this was a conspiracy, this was a betrayal – *and he was going to kill Hannibal for putting him there*.

If Hannibal had moved on…

The omega drew in a shuddering breath at the thought and swallowed down the anguish that swelled into a strangle hold at the base of his neck, painful enough that moisture collected at the edges of his eyes.

The doubts, shoved to the furthest corners of his mind, flooded back in.

Devoted or not, the alpha could have sought comfort with someone else; everyone would be disappointed but understanding; Doctor Lecter was only human. The alpha could have had the doctors draft up documents stating that his omega could no longer function in society, his wildly fluctuating episodes of anterograde/retrograde amnesia making him a danger outside institutionalized environments; unsafe around children; unsafe around Hannibal. After all, what if the omega woke one day with no memories of the alpha at all, took in their mutual nakedness, realized he was *in flagrante delicto* with a strange alpha – and do remember, Will Graham *thinks about killing people for a living*…

Hannibal could have chosen separation, moved onto another omega – Will fought against the jealousy that crackled within him at the thought – someone steady to look after the children and cook dinner with and take to the opera. The older man could have shown up at the hospital when Will was lucid on any number of occasions and asked him to sign here please, and not knowing what he was doing, Will would have signed. He would have given away his alpha, his children, the life he had built because he would have no idea of its value.

Hannibal Lecter could have taken *everything*, misled him, taken advantage of him, betrayed him.

It had taken ten days to figure out that he had children – Will could hardly believe he had mated, children were a stretch. If Hannibal had wanted to get sole custody it would have been *so* easy to manipulate the situation, so easy to *trick him*...

Will slumped back into the driver seat, breaths ragged.

Elbow propped against the windowsill, the omega drew up his memory of the first time he'd met Hannibal – in New Orleans, with a lamp behind the alpha's head so he could only make out those cheekbones and distinctive receding brows as he staggered up from making his arrest, dizzy from dashing his head against a car bumper; in the Mercy, Baltimore, with his twisted tie and his nonchalance and his homemade fritters, making poor-taste jokes about the amnesia. When Hannibal had finally talked about the children, it wasn't reluctant, like the children were now no longer any business of Will's because he was broken, useless – no, the alpha had been proud of the children they'd raised together, earnest in his affections, eager to reinstate Will into the proper place in his life.

Peter Bernadone had a cousin who tried to visit, but having married and had a child, she had only managed to see him once, on his birthday last year. The owner of the farm that had employed Peter had given him lodgings, employment, feeling responsible for the poor man who'd been a good quiet employee but their compassion could stretch only as far as the moment it was implicated that Peter Bernadone was either a serial killer or an accessory to one.

Though almost the same age as him, Peter was in reality little more than a child.

And someone had exploited Peter's vulnerabilities, stuck him with the animals of the BSHCI, to live shut-up in shadows, to suffer powdered eggs, instant mash, stale air and narrow beds, the incessant taps, bangs, howls and sobs of every poor bastard within a hundred metre radius.

Someone had pulled the strings, made Peter *their patsy* – and the FBI had let them get away with it.

He could see their design.

Will exhaled and let the final ebbs of Peter's fear and torment burn up in his chest, his mouth bitter with its grit.

An almost physical need to see Hannibal struck him.

Starting the car in a daze, his foot was already on the gas pedal when a shadow fell over his window. Will turned, barely able to squash down his jump of surprise. The same orderly who had brought Chilton's message gave a casual wave, a cigarette dangling from his fingers.

"Going already, Mister Graham?" The beta grinned, his eyes roving across the interior of the SUV, "Aren't you going to wait for Doctor Bloom?"

Will took a deep breath, trying to hide his impatience. The younger man flicked the ashes casually from the tip of his cigarette, other hand tucked firmly in his hip pocket.

"We arrived separately," he said, aware that the beta had probably witnessed his little moment in the car; he was more annoyed than embarrassed.

"Would you like me to let her know you've left?"

“It’s fine,” he already planned to text Alana later.

“Oh no,” the beta insisted, “It’s no trouble.”

Sensing that the young man – *M. Brown*, his hospital ID clip-on said – was determined to be helpful, he nodded awkwardly.

The orderly grinned, “It’s good to see you back on your feet again, Mister Graham.”

With an uneasy frown, he looked away – the beta knew that he’d been an inmate of the hospital, that much was clear, perhaps even had personally attended to him. That seemed like a small thing somehow compared to the wretchedness that was Peter.

Will felt the lingering echoes of the beta’s loneliness and pain demand a reckoning but he held the madness down, scooped it up in his hands and placed it in a box within him, to be taken out at the right time for the right enemy; somewhere across the city, his two-year old son was awake already and needed him.

Abel Gideon would have to wait.

“I’ve got to go,” he said shortly.

“Course,” the orderly waved sanguinely and backed out of the way, “Hope to see you around.”

He’s almost home before he even thought to switch his phone back on. There’s several missed calls from an unknown number, as well as one from Hannibal, but when he called back at a stoplight, it went to voicemail. He’s expecting to be greeted at the door by Marie and the toddler, but instead of the familiar sound of the Frenchwoman’s sing-song voice telling the toddler to not run, your Daddy’s not going anywhere without you, there’s faint chatter coming from the dining room and a deliciously sweet smell wafting through the air.

“Daddy!” came the familiar shriek.

The little body skidded into view a moment later, barefooted and tousle-haired from his nap. Bending to catch the two-year old who threw himself at Daddy for his hello-cuddle, the omega surrendered to being scented, kissed and literally licked in welcome. Will laughed through the pip in his throat, feeling something tight and desperate inside of him loosen.

“Do you wish to talk about what’s bothering you or should I pretend to not notice?”

Will turned, startled by the direction that the query had come from. Instead of being already in bed waiting for him, the alpha sat in front of the bedroom fireplace, the orange glow of the fake fire slanted across his face. He finished pulling on his t-shirt and padded across the room to grab his robe, already laid out at the foot of the bed.

“It’s nothing.”

The alpha stood with a sigh, fond and exasperated in equal turns, “Will, you’ve been distracted and quiet all evening – even Eli noticed.”

Will breathed in as familiar hands ran down his back and spun him around. It had taken all of his mental reserves to keep himself in check through the evening, refusing to let his disquiet with Peter Bernadone’s case get to him; with Tomas’ friends staying for dinner and the usual dramas of young children, there had been no time to do more than a quick skim read through the case file. Feeling desperately obvious, he surrendered into the embrace, hooking his chin over the curve of Hannibal’s neck to rest there.

“Is it about Tomas?”

Will pressed his nose into the side of the alpha’s neck and shook his head with a dry chuckle.

Entering the dining room earlier to find Hannibal hosting a lavish European-style afternoon tea for Tomas and his friends had been a surprise, but utterly in character with the alpha’s tendency to spoil the children; that his husband had wanted to put Tomas and his friends at ease regarding the onset of that hormonal imbalance called ‘heat’ and all it entailed had only made the gesture sweeter. He didn’t know if Hannibal’s openness was standard among alpha-omega families, or a European thing, but it’s refreshing compared to the thunderous silences and general anxiety that surrounded his own experience of puberty. In truth, the strangely intimate birds and bees chat that he’d been forced to participate in just made him adore his odd, odd alpha more.

“It’s nothing, I’m just preoccupied with things at work,” he murmured, flashing a quick smile. At Hannibal’s curious look, he added somewhat reluctantly, “Alana has me looking into one of her old cases.”

Actually, he’d been trying to figure out who the true predator was, the social worker or one of the veterinarians who kept up friendly relations with the damaged beta.

“Your unexpected excursion after lunch?”

He hummed in affirmation. Hannibal gave him an encouraging smile, waiting for details.

“She has a patient, Peter Bernadone. Remember Micah’s nightmares about the woman inside a horse?”

“Of course. In fact, Alana mentioned that very patient to me just the other week, however I hadn’t made the connection. She told me she was working on his defence and wanted an opinion but something else came up and we never followed up with each other.”

The alpha scented him thoroughly, a deep rumble of satisfaction in his chest that vibrated soothingly against him, “Were you able to reconstruct his thinking?”

Deliberating for a guilty moment, Will found himself fishing out the paper file from where he’d stuffed it under his pillow; they’re not supposed to bring work into the bedroom.

Hannibal gave him a wry look, but without comment, sat down to read. Watching the alpha's face carefully, he could tell when the man finally came across Will's own angry notes in red.

"You think he's innocent."

The box inside of him, filled with rage and compassion shook violently.

Will sighed and ran a hand across his forehead. "I know he's not a killer, no matter what the evidence says. He knew the animals, he knew Sarah Craber, knew where she was buried and definitely dug her up – but that doesn't make him the killer."

"The FBI thought it was compelling enough."

"The FBI also thinks that someone who is physically and mentally incapable of operating a vehicle, can carry a corpse twenty-miles in freezing conditions to the middle of nowhere to bury her and walk back on the same night."

The alpha's mouth quirked at the corners and wisely chose to let that line of inquiry go.

Picking up one of the autopsy photos, Hannibal studied the open chest cavity with clinical interest, a moue of distaste hidden in the sternness of his frown. "With such a specific victim type, statistically speaking, it's likely the killer received sexual or psychological gratification."

There's definitely some kind of gratification.

There was a bluntness to the murders – asphyxiation via manual strangulation, then burial in a shallow grave, repeated again and again and again with a lack of creativity that almost utilitarian; but there's no psychosis here, no mandate, and half the pleasure was from his complete anonymity. For some reason, it reminded him of a child going through one beautiful goldfish after another, enjoying their squirms as he pinched their cold tails and watched their gawping mouths, their wide-eyed mindless agitation, dropping them on the floor to see how they'd flop, crushing them under his sneakers and listening carefully to that wet crunch as the bones splintered before flushing the dead carcasses down the toilet, the quiet calm of listening to the adults talking about the blasted cat getting into the fishbowl again.

"The timeline of victims suggests compulsion," his husband noted delicately, "yet there have been no further victims attributed to the killer."

"Circumstantial," he dismissed; "This type of killer's known to take breaks."

Not to mention, with a suspect in custody, medical examiners would be predisposed to rationalizing away any connections they found in any deceased they processed thereafter.

"It's been almost three years," Hannibal pointed out, wrapping an arm around him.

Will hid a sigh and slumped against the alpha's side, head shifting until he found that spot he liked.

Whoever had killed these women was a simple and banal creature; he wouldn't just stop; he *liked* it, he'd gotten good at his game considering how many victims he had claimed, and despite the FBI getting close, he *had* gotten away with it. Why, it was like the universe itself was telling him to go for it.

Even if he took a break, he needed to get his kicks somehow… With such a specific victim type, VICAP should have picked up *something*.

"There is another possibility…" said Hannibal.

"Hmm…?"

The alpha turned to look at him, "That he never stopped at all but has simply evolved."

It's been snowing, the ground hard with frozen mud.

His cheeks stung from the wet frost of early morning. From between the crack of the barn door, he saw her, the lumbering form of that small blue car climbing up over the driveway, headlights on high in the gloom. She pulled in next to the pick-up that never left the lot, right on time as usual. He took a deep breath as he felt his mouth slick with saliva, his pulse quickening. There's no doubt, just anticipation.

Behind him the beasts shuffled and snorted, smelling of damp soil and horse sweat.

Her car door clicked opened, blasting the air with music before it cut off as the radio shut down with the engine. He waited, counting down the beats of her small booted feet as she went behind the vehicle, the thunk of the car trunk opening, the swish of her coat coming off and her reflexive gasp at the cold. He knew the prey's habits, he's been watching, he's done this before, *so many times*. He waited a long time for this, waited long enough. His hands clenched, his entire body humming with intent.

She fiddled with her keys in the deep darkness of pre-dawn, distracted, calm and completely and utterly alone.

All it would take was a few seconds if it was just about getting the job done but he liked it longer; he liked the trembling and shuddering and squealing and gawping and twisting. He liked his two-minutes, the garbled noises, the absolute crystalline awareness of that breathless moment.

She pulled on her apron, tucked those gloves into her deep pockets, tied up that medium brown hair.

Humming some asinine song to herself, she headed for him.

Five more steps.

A dull scream began in the back of his mind, the roar of a predator.

In the confusion, he could be anyone, anything – he was a monster from the dark.

Closer.

Closer.

Antonia Greer stared at him from astride the closest beast, her red-riding coat stiff with cold, fingers grey as stone; her elegantly long throat wreathed by a scarf of plum and lavender. *See*, she mouthed, her tongue black and swollen and silent forever, *see*...

"Will?"

"Will?"

Jerking upright, Will opened his eyes and blinked blearily at the wild scatter of documents and crime scene photos that he'd surrounded himself with, forming an almost crescent-shaped brook cutting him off from the rest of the room. From the open doorway, Hannibal took in the redecoration with fond exasperation.

"I'd ask you if you got any sleep but clearly, other things were on your mind."

Will rubbed his eyes, feeling overstretched. "What time is it?"

"Nearly seven."

Which meant the children were already up.

Galvanized into action, the omega bent and started picking up the papers he'd scattered, a curse under his breath as his ears picked up the sound of Elizabeta's chatter and the more raucous skitters of the dogs as they gathered at the foot of the stairs like they did every morning to greet the children.

Couching down with a grunt to help, Hannibal paused at one of the more graphic photos.

Self-conscious, Will glanced away.

Plucking it out of the alpha's hand, the omega swept the rest of the documents back into a random folder, "Sorry, I was meant to pack up hours ago, but I guess I finally dozed off."

"No apology necessary," the alpha stood with him, head tilted as he gave a curious sniff.

Opening the safe to tuck everything away, Will startled at the press of his husband's nose against his neck, the skin on the back of his arms and shoulders prickling at the gentle to and fro of Hannibal's breath ghosting over his nape. He inhaled sharply, almost shocked by how

much more sensitive he was this morning compared even to just last night, his entire body gearing into overdrive in preparation for making him receptive to sexual attention. Catching the man's wandering hands, which couldn't quite settle on what part of the omega they preferred, Will swallowed with a smile.

"As much as I like where this is going…"

His husband sighed deeply through his nose, almost in raptures, his hands squeezing as he pulled the omega against him, the clear hard line of his arousal burning between them.

"Will," the alpha murmured, his voice close to a purr, "you're in pre-heat."

Elizabeta's beside herself, wriggling in her seat with so much excitement that she needed to be reminded to chew before she swallowed and to swallow before she spoke. She had demands but was willing to negotiate – how about instead of a little itty baby, could her baby sister be a big baby instead like Junior? Or perhaps if they *had to have* a boy (big expansive sigh because *ugh*) she wanted a little omega – Victoria's brother was omega and he's the cutest, prettiest baby ever!

Across the table from her, Tomas paused mid-bite of Papa's frittata, fork poised like a trident and shot her a look that would be only fathomable among siblings; Eli ignored him and focused all her attention on twinkling adorably like the little princess she knew she was at Papa and paying special attention to Daddy, the magic gatekeeper of future baby siblings; seriously, who cared about *boring* Tomas.

The thirteen-year old speared a quarter of pancetta-crusted fig from his side plate primly in response.

Sitting next to her, Micah was conflicted; the five-year old wasn't sure if he want Daddy to have another baby, it seemed to be a lot of trouble considering last time. The eldest among the children was similarly ambivalent – the last pregnancy had been tough for Dad – even if he had resigned himself to having *those parents*, you know, the ones who still had sex.

Junior on the other hand wasn't sure what was going on and didn't like it, regressing into grumpy monosyllabic grunts as he clung to Daddy's lap on his tippy-toes and vehemently refused to get into his chair for breakfast. He threw a few adorably perplexed looks, because even if he didn't know why, Daddy smelled weird.

At the head of the table with the soft autumn sunlight glowing behind him, Hannibal smiled with almost nauseating fondness at their daughter's antics, the picture of the indulgent Pater even as he threw convert glances of lascivious longing at the omega to his right.

Underneath the table, the alpha's right leg shifted towards his husband, bumping into Will's knee; further down the table, Tomas shrilly announced he was done and scattered from the

room – he was happy his parents loved each other, but he *really* didn't want to see it.

There's a cabin, more a house really, complete with five acres of private woods and direct access to the bay, bequeathed to the family by a wealthy client of Hannibal's who had passed some years ago. A few hours away on the road in a quieter part of Gloucester County's shoreline, far enough that they're on their own but close enough that they could rush back to Baltimore in an emergency, it had been built in the sixties in the modern-style and renovated six years ago. With walls of bookcases to satisfy both his and Tomas' voracious reading habits, it's a relaxing place, full of solid wooden furniture that Will would have picked out on his own and plenty of natural light.

They depart mid-morning while Marie's out running errands with the toddler, who left amicably enough since this was usually what happened after breakfast anyway. Will had allowed himself to hold his baby for a minute longer, to ask for one more kiss from the little boy, before buckling Junior into the back of Marie's car.

"Don't look so worried, Will," Hannibal chuckled, his free hand massaging the meat of his omega's thigh as he drove. The proprietary touch sent a curl of heat through Will's stomach, "We'll be back in a few days."

"I'm not," he breathed, reflexively slanting a faint smile at his alpha, then realized with a start that he wasn't lying. His skin was growing increasingly sensitive, almost to the point of uncomfortable, and his mind could barely focus, like there was a hive of bees buzzing between his ears – but over all of that, he felt at peace.

For all his caution and general aversions to heat, post-Galinthy, there was no better way to ascertain if he had made a full recovery than to experience a regular heat-cycle. And despite all the seasonal symptoms he'd shown, before this morning's shift in his scent – that subtle perfume of seduction to any alpha bystanders that he was not only nominally fertile, but would shortly be receptive to breeding – there had been no clear indication that he would actually go through a standard heat, with slick production and the over-aggressive libido.

His GP, Doctor Nakamura, had been pleased when informed. She'd warned them this heat might be prolonged, perhaps even unusually strong considering he was a mated omega with several children, but not to worry – it was just his system resetting, recalibrating itself. He honestly had no idea what to expect, his last memory of heat being from before Tomas, but Hannibal's confidence was almost infectious in its joyous expectation; this was a celebration, as far as the alpha was concerned, and he intended to take advantage of every moment to enjoy his husband.

Hannibal took his hand, wetting his lips as if he were about to eat a succulent treat before pressing his mouth to the knuckles, his eyes never leaving the road.

Both exhaled when the moment was over.

Arriving early afternoon, they were to shower – separately – but ended up making out more than freshening up when Hannibal decided he desperately needed Will's help washing his back. They fell asleep afterwards in a tangle of limbs, still tied together. Will woke to deep dusk and Hannibal laughing softly on the phone as he chatted with Irene and any child who

managed to wrestle the phone away; the beta had merely texted to ask permission on Tomas' behalf about a sleepover but it seemed polite to reply by calling. In the bathroom, he took his contraceptive, taking the pill dry before joining his husband in the lounge. Something smelled wonderful, and Will pecked the alpha's jaw before nestling there, arms looped around his man's waist.

"What's for dinner?"

"Hmm, never ask," Hannibal beamed, "Spoils the surprise."

Dinner was simple – oysters on ice festooned with crayfish, with an accompanying course of goat cheese and fig salad. Pomegranates dotted the edible centrepiece, gleaming darkly like blood gems from their thick rose husks. For all that it was delicious, they're both distracted, as the scent of heat noticeably thickened during the meal.

They barely finished cleaning up before Will was rubbing his face into Hannibal's nape and sneaking a hand under Hannibal's apron. The rest of the night was an enjoyable blur, and neither of them get much sleep when Will woke just after midnight, trembling for his alpha and already wet for a knot.

They spend most of the next day in bed, grazing sporadically on platters of cold cuts, cheese and fruit as they wandered from the en suite bathroom to the wall then back to bed, never more than an arm's length apart, the pleasure almost too much to bear. He's drunk with it, soaked in it; there were tears in his eyes, and not just from his hair being pulled. The day after saw them deeming to leave the sanctity of their bedroom for breakfast that was as much as nutritional need as another chance for seduction, and missed lunch by sleeping through it in a mess of sweat and bodily fluids.

At the back of his mind, he knew it was just endorphins making him like this, but he found himself unreasonably distracted by every smile the alpha sent him, by the sight of Hannibal's hands, by the movement of the cloth at his husband's crotch. For dinner, they got through their main but ended up eating their chocolate and roses-themed dessert naked at midnight, perched together on the edges of their seats so their knees could touch. Still riding the high of his heat hormones, Will dragged the alpha back to bed.

He drifted into consciousness some indeterminate time later in a warm bath, the delicate crackle of lather foaming under strong dextrous fingers as they drifted through his hair and grazed his throat. Still somewhat oversensitive, Will moaned quietly at the massage, both sensual and incredibly intimate, even dangerous.

"That feels nice," he murmured sleepily.

Hannibal's quiet chuckle vibrated across his wet scalp.

It's not over, but his heat had calmed enough on day four that they were able to hold conversations and finish meals at the table. Set up in his armchair, which was almost identical to the one in the corner of their Baltimore kitchen, Will read the article headlines aloud from one of Hannibal's subscriptions as the alpha threw something together for brunch. There was one piece in the psychology journal titled 'Searching the Internet inflates estimates of internal

knowledge,' which had him arching an eyebrow, and about a dozen more in the same vein, each inexplicably titled with something like 'The art of racing (deadlines) in the rain' - whatever the hell that meant.

"Should you remain," Will paused dramatically, "Facebook-friends with your Ex."

Hannibal chuckled under his breath, "And…?"

"And what?"

"Should one remain Facebook-friends with one's ex?"

Will snorted and decisively set the iPad aside, "Finding out would require me to click on it."

Hannibal threw him a smitten smile, and neatly halved a purpling artichoke.

His heat finally ebbed on Sunday afternoon. Their final day at the property, Monday, was a day of rest, with breakfast on the deck and lazing about, reading or in Hannibal's case, finishing a composition on the baby grand. They ate a light lunch and left shortly after that intending to beat the peak hour rush and eat dinner with the children. They're only thirty-minutes into their three-hour drive when the traffic noticeably slowed.

"What do you think?" Hannibal asked, twisting around to survey the full extent of the traffic jam.

"Perhaps a car accident," he suggested, even as his mind put together the details and it dawned on him that the delay was a police checkpoint.

To his relief, it only took five minutes for their vehicle to come to the front of the line.

He frowned at the vans by the side of the road, each marked with the symbol of the local city council, seemingly parked in the middle of nowhere. No, he realized, not exactly; though well-hidden by the trees, the top of a house chimney peeked out over the greenery; someone lived here, well, he revised as he saw the first body bag being carried down the mulch driveway, *had* lived here. His frown grew as a second body bag followed, and then several more, each progressively smaller than the last. A dark-skinned beta man, clearly in charge by his bearing, trembled as he unzipped one of the body bags, revealing the tip of a small nose, belonging to perhaps a five-year old.

Flinching sharply away from the sight, the omega took a shuddering inhale.

Next to him, Hannibal thanked the officer for returning his license then wished the officer a good afternoon. They pulled away moments later, the entire stop being about three minutes.

"I wonder what that was about," the alpha remarked lightly.

In the passenger seat, Will swallowed his nausea and let the romantic melancholy of Mahler's Symphony No. 5 wash over him, refusing to think about what he had glimpsed.

A few minutes later, they're passed by a train of three black SUVs with government plates racing in the opposite direction.

Chapter End Notes

OMG I swear crowning achievement this chapter-- I MADE CHILTON SAY YOLO
Why are Hannibal and Will so adorable together, making fun of psychology articles together and eating chocolate cake decorated with sugared roses naked together and Hannibal gave Will that corner armchair in the kitchen
And look, Matt is alive and Peter is in jail

Thanks Eclectic, as always. Also, to Housenka, thank you for always being so encouraging
So I was supposed to post this a week ago, but I have been suffering insomnia and just all round could not think straight. So I sat on it - sorry Kyuu
Also originally there was supposed to be an afternoon tea scene with Tomas and his friends, but I spent maybe a week trying to tweak the scene with Eclectic's help - time that I could have spent writing more of the story - but no matter what I did, I couldn't make the scene work for me. At this point, I've given it up; usually I prefer to show rather than tell in my stories, but it gets me into trouble, with writing scenes that just seem like odd asides - I'm sure there are people reading who are sick of fluff, and just wish I'd tell them everything already.

Orelhas de porco

Chapter Summary

The last Ripper tableau. Abel Gideon's unexpected visitor. Conspiracy theories.

Chapter Notes

THANK you for the patience - and also the comments and kudos, they kept me going. Unbetad. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 23 February 2016

Edward Moses saw the new arrivals in his peripheral vision. Wrapping up his debrief of the officer who had been first-on-scene, he loped up the rocky incline to greet them, using the low-hanging gnarled tree branches as handholds in the bracing wind. Will's eyes drifted across the collection of police vehicles, the coroner's van and the FBI crime lab truck, everything daubed in red and blue overlaid by a dull amber glow from the sun descending behind over-stretched clouds.

It had been a miserably windy and cold February day, and he'd been reluctant to drive here to a lonely stretch of Virginian coastline - probably wouldn't have come out at all if Hannibal hadn't insisted on driving them. Behind him, said alpha stepped closer to put a shielding arm around him as an FBI investigator squeezed by on the narrow strip of sidewalk. Will leaned into the touch and glanced at the darkened windows of the SUV; at the slack-mouth of the toddler, warm and fast asleep; at Micah's enchanted face as one of the local deputies charged to sit inside the car with the children handed over his wide-brimmed hat. The four-year old put it on gingerly and giggled mutely inside the car, shaking his head to and fro because he wanted the hat to spin like Eli's skirts.

A passing beta in an FBI jacket did a double-take at the sight of the two young children in the car.

"Mister Graham," the agent greeted, "I'm sorry about the late notice."

“It’s fine,” Will said curtly; he was supposed to have picked Tomas up from school today for rehearsal, supposed to be in the scattered audience listening to the Youth Orchestra practice for the spring recital. He wanted to at least be back in time to take his son home later tonight. Thankfully, Eli was at a friend’s; “May I?”

The beta nodded and gestured for someone to get him some gloves. Will took a pair for himself and handed over another set to Hannibal before descending the steep rocky slope to where a seaside holiday house was perched. He ignored the side-glances and confused frowns of the uniforms and headed straight through to the back. Agent Gracen gave a surprised nod, for it was after 4PM on a Tuesday evening and she hadn’t called him. Will dismissed her from his thoughts, his eyes already cutting across the details; too clean for a holiday home not in use – tarp, he concluded – which meant someone had taken the tarp; where was it now?

Vaguely he heard the agent issued orders for everyone to take a break, her thick-soled boots thudding on the wooden floorboards as she vacated the premises. One by one, they left, unenthusiastic at being forced out into the nipping cold. The last to leave muttered an apology, almost running into Hannibal and Agent Moses. The alpha’s frown tracked the agent outside.

Will’s gaze flicked around the room as the two men spread out, Hannibal doing his best to be unobtrusive as he looked around while Agent Moses wandered into the kitchen, out of the way. The house had a combined lounge and kitchen with no dining area, fairly new modern furnishings, solid and masculine, with none of the design flourishes that Hannibal had opted for; if Will had to guess, whoever lived here probably bought the entire layout straight from a catalogue. There was a drinks cart that had been tagged for photography, the decanter already dusted for prints – nothing of course, there was never anything – and the kitchen was spotless, good enough for a magazine.

He turned to look at the victim. Or halves of him.

Moisture collected in puddles by the heels of the man’s leather shoe and underneath the craftsman-style armchair he rested upon, traced through with streaks of ochre red.

The man who had once been Mister Keith Miller had been transformed into a cross-section, locked mid-motion by surgical pins and so cold that the solid bulk of flesh and viscera sizzled lightly, an icy vapor wafting off the bisected corpse. His eyes traced the organs, the division of the trachea, the truncated bronchus, the lumps of the intestines divided.

The heart was missing.

The right hand was posed on the armrest around an empty crystal tumbler, while the vacant gaze of the late Mister Miller was pointed at the mirror image of itself. The left side didn’t have a drink in hand but rather a book, laid open over the curve of a glacial thigh. It was dissolving slowly into paper mulch as frozen digits melted onto the pages.

Moses cleared his throat, “It was called in only two hours ago. We believe it was set up around midday – he was frozen in dry ice.”

Will reached in carefully and flipped it to reveal the glossy front cover – *American Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. He left the soaked pages as they were.

The second victim in the sounder had been a psychiatrist. A book had been missing off the man's shelves.

Going to the kitchen, he exited via the side door and walked around until he was standing directly below the window where the tableau had been set up. From here, with the reflection of the rapidly darkening sky painted across the wide panels of glass in swaths of grey and blue, he saw the twin images, saw how easy it was to mistake it for two living breathing people sitting together in intimate discourse, resting comfortably rather than locked into place by metal and ice, saw the veneer of their skins, the careful construction of civility, of normalcy.

See, the Ripper whispered intimately in the curves of his ear, **see**?

(The face they turned to the world was not who they were – there was so much more beneath the skin than could ever be guessed by looking…)

Behind him, there was the crunch of gravel and grass as Hannibal followed him.

"Will, we shouldn't be out here. With such high winds it's not safe."

(But it was safe – they were peers, and dared he say it, *intimate*)

He stared at the diorama until Hannibal wrapped an arm around him and guided him back to the car.

<u>The Present</u>

Abel Gideon knew his schedule perfectly. Wake up. His morning aria in the showers while being side-eyed by some suspicious guards. Breakfast in bed – one mound of scrambled eggs, one pat of overcooked oats, one dollop of jam or peanut butter with its accompanying pre-buttered toast, one piece of fruit (usually not banana, sadly) and a cup of truly substandard coffee; it was bad enough that it was instant, but it was usually also tepid. On a typical day there would be time alone to digest his meal and then it was off to his usual morning interrogations.

The stern-faced heavy-set FBI agent darkening his cell window was not scheduled.

Glancing at the man from his spot laying down very comfortably on his bed, Gideon squinted at the image of the agent upside down. "The man who has been reading my mail."

"Not personally, just the summaries," the agent quipped, then blinked, almost as if confused why he had spoken at all before his expression hardened.

“Doctor Gideon,” Jack Crawford greeted politely, face tight enough to bounce a coin off, grief and tiredness lining his eyes and the fissures of his mouth in red. “We didn’t get a chance to finish our conversation last time.”

Actually, it had been two hours of mostly one-sided threats and intimidation followed by the agent sulking in the corner of the transport van, glaring daggers at the recaptured alpha.

Sighing under his breath, he thumbed another page in the ragged paperback he’d been given for entertainment, “Are you my new therapist, Agent Crawford? Must say, I knew funding was tight, but this seems radical not to mention risky on Frederick’s part.”

The agent shuffled forwards, toeing the white line dividing safety and peril. Jack Crawford’s eyes were solemn, resolved, and already guilty; the eyes of someone who had committed a great wrong and now, like a masochist unable to help himself, was about to throw himself off the precipice again in his quest to right perceived grievances. Intrigued by the man’s fraught silence, he closed his book, tucking in a loose sheet of toilet paper as a bookmark.

“Several years ago, we had a conversation.”

“I remember.”

It had been a poor decision. He couldn’t have made much sense to the FBI agent. He had barely made sense to himself. Shouldn’t have watched all those nonsensical Hollywood thriller films. His late wife had truly bad taste in movies.

“You told me that I was looking in the right box but in the wrong corner,” Jack Crawford’s smile was bleak, bordering quite frankly on depressing, “I didn’t listen, I should have.”

“Coulda…woulda…shoulda…” he drawled, fascinated with how his fellow alpha seemed to grow stiffer with each word, “Is this an apology?”

“No,” The agent said, “No. I want to talk about Hannibal Lecter.”

Straight to the point. *Lovely*.

He gave a thoughtful hum, “Sounds vaguely familiar…”

Crawford narrowed his eyes, contemptuous. “Perhaps it’ll jog your memory to know that Doctor Lecter’s mate is Special Agent Will Graham.”

“Ah yes, Will Graham,” he smiled up at the ceiling, feeling a low buzz of excitement in his belly at the blistering sarcasm in the agent’s usually bland voice; it reminded him of his schoolboy days, all those hormonally-charged alphas growling at each other in the corridors and yards. “I’m glad that’s all cleared up now, never did believe a nice omega boy like him could do all those terrible things you accused him of.”

At the top of his peripheral vision, Jack Crawford visibly swallowed, eyes glinting with that unspoken guilt before they shuttered. The resident of Cell D4 hid his amused smile.

“You once asked to speak to Doctor Lecter.”

“I did.”

“Care to share what you spoke about?”

Giving the FBI agent a wry look, he sat up and swung his legs off the bed to sit facing the man, sensing that this would be a long conversation; his neck had just gotten over the strain from sleeping in the blasted prisoner transport van all the way from Minnesota and he really didn’t want to go through that again.

“Just because I’m here, Agent Crawford, doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten thirty years of medicine – unfortunately, my warnings to Frederick regarding Mister Graham’s declining health were ignored.”

“So you contacted Doctor Lecter?”

Abel Gideon leveled a disapproving eyebrow at his visitor, “I was brought up correctly, unlike some; I’d have felt terrible if something happened.”

There was a perplexed frown then slowly, understanding came over Jack Crawford's broad face. A moment later, his brows smoothed out from their tortured crossover between a frown and a glower as he seemingly arrived at a decision. Whatever the decision was, however, the agent didn’t say.

“There’s been questions raised, regarding your escape,” Agent Crawford continued.

“My escape, hmm…” he mused aloud, “That seems all anyone wants to talk about these days…”

“You killed five people and attempted to kill Doctor Chilton.”

“Four,” Gideon corrected, “I take responsibility for the orderly and the guard and my condolences to the Carruthers and the Nahns, but I cannot to take responsibility for the driver, or for that matter, the *festive* aftermath – but you suspected as much, didn’t you, Agent Crawford?”

Jack Crawford pursed his lips and pleaded the fifth.

“Abel Gideon has been making some very disturbing accusations.”

Noticing the omega’s curious frown, Chilton explained, “Oh it’s the same old thing he’s been saying for weeks; that Hannibal is a criminal mastermind, that he’s apparently both the Butcher and the Chesapeake Ripper and several others and you’re in on it all.”

Will felt his tongue, dry and scratchy, convulse against the roof of his mouth as he resisted the urge to swallow. Like a marionette, he smiled faintly as directed by his specter, who rose

from where he had been tucked away between one breath and another. He regretted turning down a drink.

“Abel Gideon is a lunatic.”

Chilton chuckled, delighted to find common ground with the omega, “It's all ridiculous, of course.”

Which was why this wasn’t an FBI interview room.

“Unfortunately, Gideon can be quite persuasive.”

Which was why he was here at all.

Will had arrived earlier than agreed and sat through Chilton’s dire warnings without hearing a single word; he already knew it all – don’t give him anything except soft paper; no pens, no pencils; don’t accept anything he offers you; no touching; we’re watching; he’s going to lie to you; he will try to manipulate you; don’t trust him. Apparently, new information had come to light and the FBI wanted Will at the helm – that’s all Chilton had told him on the phone, becoming almost evasive when pressed for details.

Which meant that telling you now, to surprise you, was the point, his shadow breathed into the inner shell of his ear – *except this was Frederick Chilton,* he frowned.

Yes, Frederick Chilton, who spied on every single inhabitant of this hospital.

Will felt a swell of revulsion as memories of elementary school swirled together with his imaginary episodes of imprisonment – his little nine-year old heart pounding as he used the toilet cubicle, painfully aware that the Ratchet boys were playing behind the toilet block and if they knew he was here, they’d climb over the stall to check if he was really what they said he was (omega, *alien*) – and dragged their talons across over old wounds.

Outwardly he raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

“Hannibal was investigated.”

“Thoroughly, and they found nothing,” Chilton gave him a wry look, “Classic cry for attention – I honestly don’t know how the FBI could be taken in by such ludicrous tales.”

Will could. They wanted to believe him.

(Despite what he claimed, Chilton wanted to believe Gideon too. The claims were extraordinary. And if they were true, it would be beyond extraordinary.)

Someone must have noticed the same discrepancies as he had, and had started wondering. But his secret remained safe; after all, they had no evidence contrary to the story they knew – and one didn’t automatically leap to conspiracy faced with a single conflicting detail. Or for that matter, the words of murderer who had identity issues.

The psychiatrist gave an indignant huff at the imaginary slights of an inept Bureau, “Anyway, I thought a visit by you might settle him down, break up whatever schemes he thinks he’s running.”

“Giving in, Frederick?” Will forced a half-smile to couch the sharp words, “That’s not like you.”

Peering at him curiously, the alpha seemed momentarily unsure if he’d been insulted or not and evidently couldn’t quite make up his mind.

“Yes, well, it's sad to see a veteran like Jack Crawford fall for such hoary old chestnuts.”

Your husband, he knows more than he’s telling you, and so does Jack Crawford. You should be careful, Mister Graham…

Will forced away his shiver and pretended to check on his phone, using the time to take it out and tap blindly at the screen to *think*. “Jack Crawford was the one who interviewed Gideon?”

“He’s taken a special interest – who knows why,” Chilton shook his head at the omega in mutual commiseration, eyes flickering to the phone with the puerile interest that overshadowed all their interactions before the alpha remembered himself and returned to looking at Will’s face, “Unlike myself, Special Agent Crawford doesn't have the good sense to ignore Gideon’s lies. I'm hoping your opinion could help me settle the matter.”

“Which is?”

“That Abel Gideon is dangerous and enjoys manipulation,” Chilton scoffed, “That he is an intelligent psychopath, and that if we believed every word out of his mouth, next we’ll be accusing *me* of being the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Will returned the man’s smile, struggling not to laugh at the ridiculous notion.

“Don’t you care?”

“About?

“If he’s right.”

Chilton smiled, his expression a strange hybrid between patronizing and sympathetic – his gentler feelings reserved for the confused lovely omega who had spent so long in the heads of killers that he didn’t know who was anymore, and his derision for the omega who dared to play in his pond.

“I admit you’re incredibly perceptive, lucid, and you’ve got *that thing* you do –”

Echopraxia, he thought, *say it, you prick*, hating the inflection in the psychiatrist’s voice, as though it were something fascinating and bordering on occult when it was just strange and painful.

"– as an omega; you would be a rare and prized patient…" The alpha's eyes grew distant before snapping back into the room as he scoffed gently, "But a murderer? No offense, Will, you don't seem the type."

No offense, he didn't say, but you would be wrong.

And dead, his shadow quipped.

Outwardly he smiled along, tight-lipped and pleasantly polite, as Frederick Chilton began to summarize his therapy notes, injecting the usual volume of inappropriate jocularity and his special brand of insensitivity.

And dead, Will agreed.

Seated with his eyes closed and his arms crossed, Abel Gideon gave every appearance of a statue, a man asleep and unawares. Milky streaks of light spilled across the floors and glinted off the dull grey of the cages highlighting the pallor of the older man's skin, already growing dull from his new underground home, making the man appear almost ghostly.

"Doctor Bloom, while you are lovely," murmured Gideon, breaking his self-imposed silence, "I am rather sick of your company."

Drawing to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, Will regarded the alpha, his apprehensions rolling inside his ribcage, tempestuous but contained. This wouldn't be like his conversation with Tobias Budge, when he had been caught unawares. He's not a confused twenty-four year old omega thrust into a life he didn't understand, not anymore; he's had practice at this, months to plan, calculate and bargain; all things that he might say; all the things he might be forced to do. The best thing was, he didn't even have to pretend. Gideon had made his accusations, and nothing had happened.

"I've been advised to stay on this side of the white line."

Abel Gideon cracked one eye open, looking for all the world like a lizard who had been interrupted mid-nap.

"Select patients have taken to urinating on their therapist," he confided conversationally, eyes lighting up in merriment, "If the floor were wood, it'd be warped."

Suddenly the two garment bags hanging from Chilton's coat rack took on a new significance.

Will felt a trickle of dark amusement and wondered if the psychiatrist was scowling upstairs at having his little humiliation revealed.

*"*Drawing a line might encourage a pissing contest."

Gideon's mouth quirked in perceived camaraderie.

"Pissing contests bore me. Please, have a seat."

He sat, seeing no point in being willful and almost immediately regretted it as his nose was assaulted by the fake citrus of cheap hospital-grade detergent. The taste rolled over his tongue and trickled at his throat, causing a faint headache to throb at the base of his skull.

Holding the alpha's reptilian gaze, Will allowed his shadow to peek at Gideon from behind his eyes. The ex-surgeon stared back.

"I'd say I'm surprised to see you, but you're the second surprise visitor I've had, Mister Graham. Would you care to guess who was the first?"

"I don't need to; Doctor Chilton has already given me the update."

There was a long beat of silence as both parties examined one another with the bald curiosity of combatants. The caged alpha leaned in to take in the scent of Will Graham in the manner universal to many beasts – eyes fixed on the creature, inquisitive, fascinated, as his nose did the work, as he stilled and his brain wavered between attack and succor – while the visitor regarded him carefully, warily.

"Are you worried?" whispered Gideon, his muddy blue gaze speculative.

"That you're telling stories?"

"Frederick forbade me visitors – I had to entertain myself somehow," the alpha smiled, unrepentant, "And they're not stories, Mister Graham, it's the truth."

"I doubt you know the difference," Will said, feeling a certain sense of viciousness at the startled twitch in Gideon's brows – because Gideon had escaped, he'd been *free*, all he had to do was keep away, and his 'story' would have disappeared with him, but *no*, he was here, causing problems; "and the FBI doesn't appreciate being sent on a wild-goose chase."

"Hide and seek, more like – I'm simply directing them to bigger game."

Will met Gideon's eyes briefly – the alpha stared back avidly, eyes gleaming, thoroughly entertained – he glanced away, caught between anticipation and dread, "What did Jack Crawford want to speak to you about?"

"You mean, Frederick hasn't handed over a full transcript?" An odd expression flashed over the alpha's features and he looked up at the ceiling to their invisible audience before answering the question, "Agent Crawford had questions about my escape, gaps in the timeline. I offered to fill them in."

“Out of altruism I suppose.”

Abel Gideon's mouth creased in an irrepressible smirk.

“I told Jack Crawford that I had facilitated the conditions of my escape under my own advice,” the alpha told him in slow measured tones, with the crisp certainty of something well-rehearsed – *and I didn’t give you away*, those serpentine eyes snapped, *have a little faith*. “Upon exiting the transport, imagine to my surprise when I found the driver already dead.”

Will looked away, his frown contemplative. The reports covering the manhunt for Abel Gideon had first crossed his desk months prior, nothing more than routine catch-up reading. He had reread the full file now, twice, in the previous fortnight. He had kept his insights to himself but had, upon a more-thorough examination of the photos, noted that something changed dramatically during the escape attempt. He’d thought the differences in methodology – *in style* – was due to a shift in Abel Gideon’s mental state, but it seemed the truth was much simpler:

“You had a *friend*,” Will inferred with a warm throb of vindication in his gut. Despite his instincts, he hadn’t been certain; gleaning a crime scene from photographs was never quite the same as a fresh scene. But if he was correct about this then…

The FBI assumed that the transport van had stopped because the driver heard the commotion and parked to help his colleagues with their errant prisoner, only to be overpowered. But the truth was the driver never stood a chance; as soon as he exited the driver’s seat, he’d been marked for death by Gideon’s accomplice.

Someone with the means and knowledge to open up the corpses with enough surgical finesse to keep the organs undamaged, to hang the organs on the tree with whimsy and confidence…

There was were only so many candidates who fit that description.

What were the odds of the Chesapeake Ripper aiding the escape of a dangerous murderer in the same week that someone would sneak into Quantico and leave a body on the grounds to exonerate him?

“You met him,” Will’s insides shivered, ambivalent, “the Chesapeake Ripper.”

***See**, the Ripper whispered intimately in the curves of his ear, **see**?*

(The face they turned to the world was not who they were – there was so much more beneath the skin than could ever be guessed by looking…)

Abel Gideon gave him a smile of Machiavellian delight, the expression stealing over his features. Raising his hands with a flourish, the alpha gave him a polite sitting ovation.

In the blink of an eye, he saw it; the cold icebox of the transport; the inane conversation with the blank-faced orderly and equally blank-faced guard; the fight – the alpha beast let loose; *all I need is one hand free…*

This is your chance, to wear the Ripper’s skin before you die…

Gave him something better to do with his tongue than wag it…

Frederick, you deserve everything *coming your way…*

It's amazing how many organs the body can offer up before it really starts to suffer…

"I'm not sure if we can be considered friends," the older man mused thoughtfully, "Tentative allies would be more accurate, or perhaps temporary dance partner."

Will inhaled slowly, his hands fisting inside his pockets.

The questions lodged themselves under his tongue, jammed themselves between his teeth – but still he said nothing. He couldn't ask the questions he wanted to ask. *Oh* Gideon wanted to tell him, there was practically a flicker of excitement at the base of the man's throat as they stared off over the subject – but what was the point of knowing a secret if you couldn't hold it over someone's head, they had to *want*, that's how you made them *suffer – let's make a trade, quid pro quo*.

"You killed the orderly and the guard, but the driver was already dead," he stated, his imagination already downstream, flying ahead of the evidence, "then working together, you gutted and strung them."

"Well, I pitched in," Gideon's eyes glittered with schadenfreude, "but he has an eye for this sort of thing."

Then the Ripper had driven Gideon back to Baltimore, to the office of Doctor Paul Carruthers, taken a photo of the crime scene and sent it to Freddie Lounds with the dead psychiatrist's own email, and then repeated the process with Doctor Nahn.

"The Ripper was the one who sabotaged the power so you could take Doctor Chilton."

But not the other psychiatrists.

The detail niggled at Will. He couldn't put his finger on why.

Gideon smirked.

"Frederick was a very naughty boy that year. He planted the idea that I was the Ripper and because of that, a nurse died. I asked Frederick while he was under the knife, what had been the plan once I'd become the Ripper – surely the real Ripper would keep ripping, and you know what he said?" Raising his voice, Gideon scowled at the imaginary feet of their eavesdropper. "That *he* would have the Ripper dismissed as a copy-cat."

Abel Gideon stared at the ceiling for a beat longer, growling deep in his throat when a trapdoor didn't magically open and drop Chilton into their midst. Against the far wall, the orderly who had taken a step towards them shuffled awkwardly on the same spot before deciding to not come over after all.

"You mutilated Doctor Chilton for the Ripper."

“Oh trust me, no one forced me to do it – seemed only right that Frederick apologise on my behalf for the insult. I admit, I thought of you as I cut into him.”

Will met the alpha’s expectant gaze with an arched eyebrow – was he supposed to be pleased?

With a happy sigh, Gideon added sotto voce, “Technically, I only needed a kidney, but you should have seen Frederick’s face; I just couldn’t help myself.”

The man’s shoulders shook with his chuckles.

“He’s going to kill you, Doctor Gideon. You know his identity. He won’t let that go.”

“I’ll take my chances,” replied Gideon with his usual smile, a subdued twist of the lips somewhere between contempt and amusement. “Out of curiosity, how did you end up here?”

“I drove.”

A flash of reluctantly charmed ire crossed the ex-surgeon’s face; it reminded Will of being fourteen and bristly, and having the teachers at school take him aside to ask him what was wrong (because omegas didn’t misbehave and if they did, something was up, the poor darlings).

“Please, Mister Graham, I’m genuinely curious; how did *you* end up in such a macabre profession?”

...A nice omega boy like you, Gideon didn’t say, but Will heard it anyway.

How had he ended up here? Will felt a clap of vertigo as his mind flung the memories at him in accusation. Even if he remembered carrying Tomas now, nuzzling him, cradling him, the memories were sat strangely inside his mind. Like someone else’s memories, relayed and then reconstructed within the parenthesis of his imagination.

At night, worry kept Will awake beside the alpha in their giant king-sized bed, his brain twisting with ‘too soon, not ready,’ and the lingering pang of regret. He kept waiting for it, that feeling that omegas were meant to have, a maternal yearning but all he felt was nausea and anxiety. He knew the baby was for the best but sometimes, like now, it was like he’d been infected by a worm and it was burrowing through his cerebral folds, and he wondered about packing a bag and getting in the car… Then he would remember that he didn’t have a car and common sense would reassert itself; Hannibal slept each night with a hand on Will’s stomach, so that even a trip to the toilet wouldn’t escape his notice. The alpha had even started to think about names, texting his ideas to Will almost hourly from work; on most evenings, the excited father-to-be poured over leather-bound binders of ancient family-trees in the study once Will had retired to bed.

“I didn’t realise being a teacher was considered macabre.”

The older man threw him a wry look, entertained by the lack of cooperation in the way that a grown-up might be charmed by the antics of a child. “You haven’t asked me.”

“About what?”

“Jack Crawford asked me to describe the Chesapeake Ripper to him,” Gideon said, tilting his head curiosity to the side, “You haven’t even asked if I recognized him.”

“Did you?”

The alpha smiled.

“I promised that I wouldn’t say anything – honour among thieves and, *well*,” Gideon gestured vaguely, “Technically, I won’t be breaking such a promise if I should describe his house to you. I’ve been there, in fact I sat at his dining table.”

All while the FBI had been scouring the cities' streets for him; the Ripper must have laughed. Of course, that’s if this was true and not just a story.

“I’ll describe it to you,” Gideon inclined his head, “if you promise to keep an open mind.”

Well, how could anyone refuse an offer like that.

His dread rose like a tidal wave as his mind traced the edges and whorls of the conversation so far and flung itself ahead of the present and to the end.

Taking the silence as agreement, the alpha began to speak; “It was a cobalt blue dining room–”

“Cobalt,” Elizabeta uttered curiously, tracing a glittery-fingernail over the bold print of the paint chips spread across the maple dining table. They’re planning to repaint the room, a biennale necessity in a house with three dogs and four children.

Chuckling, Hannibal pressed a fond kiss to the little girl’s temple and adjusted her slightly in his lap as he leaned away to grab one of the samples further along the table.

“– with an ostentatious herb garden,” continued Gideon, “and over the fireplace, an antique salver of the goddess Diana, watching a stag set upon by hunting dogs, mounted inside an insulated display case. The table was…”

Will knew the tale; Actaeon the alpha hunter coming upon the goddess and her nymphs bathing, and for his audacity, the omega goddess had punished him – transformed into a stag, he had run and been torn apart by his own dogs. He had read Ovid’s account in Classical Studies 101, a requirement of his college scholarship – because of course, *all* omegas must know the classics.

He also knew the salver tray that Gideon was referring to.

“That should be enough to go on, don’t you think?”

Abel Gideon studied him with the stillness of a serpent, biding his time to strike.

Breathe, he reminded himself, *breathe*.

Will stood up, feeling the weight of himself in his soles.

"I say it's the husband," Haschen declared between gulps of beer, "It's always the husband."

Except when it wasn't.

"When it comes to how far someone can stretch the truth, I assure you, Abel Gideon is a master."

(Tobias Budge had no reason to lie about what he saw. Then there was the house in Rappahannock. The letters in the barn. The four dead alphas in New Orleans, rotted away to bones in their crypts.)

"Will!"

He half-turned instinctively at the call but his body kept its momentum forward; out of the corner of his eye, he saw the shift in the orderly's expression before the beta's mouth opened to shout.

Will stumbled as he was reeled in, the shoulder of his coat snared by Abel Gideon's fist.

"Agent Crawford is going to pursue his investigation, come hell or high water; because there are frayed edges to this tale you've woven, and he can feel them," the alpha told him conversationally, breath hot against his ear; as though there weren't orderlies running towards them with their cattle prods out; as if the guards weren't tumbling down the stairs after a frantic Alana Bloom, service weapons at the ready; as if Will didn't have his fingers wrapped around Gideon's wrist in an unforgiving grip. "He's tugging at the strings, Mister Graham, you should be concerned – I certainly am – it's just a matter of time."

Somewhere in the background, Alana Bloom clattered down the steps.

Pulling back, he stared into Abel Gideon's eyes; slate blue eyes stared back, solemn.

"And frankly neither of us controls our stories well enough to survive Jack Crawford's good intentions."

Before he had a chance to process the words into something that made sense, the older man pushed him away in the arms of an orderly, her warm beta scent driving away the acridness of Gideon's. The orderly quickly passed him on to Alana Bloom, who wrenched him away as though saving him from the jaws of death itself.

"Agent Crawford could use a friend, Mister Graham," the man said loudly after him, ignoring the cacophony of threats being yelled by the guards.

Whatever else Gideon meant to say was lost as the orderlies and guards converged.

Alana Bloom paced from the door to the window and then back again, her mouth pursed in fury. She reminded Will of a prowling feline, her fur ruffled and her back arched in agitation, claws at the ready to be unsheathed at a word. Chilton stared back, passive-aggressively calm. In an uncharacteristic display of wisdom, the head psychiatrist had chosen not to try charming his way out of being berated and instead waited for his tongue lashing, his pen balanced between his fingers like the world's most ineffective barrier.

"Abel Gideon has a history of being delusional."

"Yes," Chilton exhaled in long-suffering, "I'm well aware."

"Then explain to me *why* you're trying to involve *us* in these delusions!"

In the corner, Will forced down a flinch and wandered over to the windows.

"Because Abel Gideon is psychotic. Not psychic." The alpha bit out, "The simplest explanation as to why he can describe the Graham-Lecter home is that he was there. Unless you have another theory."

Alana Bloom crossed her arms.

"Someone could have given him those details."

He could have given Gideon those details, was what she meant, while he had been half-crazed from illness and drugged out of his mind here in the hospital.

Scanning the carpark until he found the SUV where he had left it, Will checked his watch. Hannibal thought he was with Micah's kindergarten class, helping corral five-year-olds into some semblance of order as one of many parental tagalongs for the field trip to the children's museum.

Chilton sniffed, indignant, "There hasn't been a word exchanged between Gideon to anyone and anything, including his cell ceiling, that I'm not aware of – *before* or after his escape."

Will inhaled slowly, holding the breath. Hannibal had left early this morning for back-to-back patient appointments and probably won't check his phone till lunchtime, where upon he would read the message about the change in plans several hours too late. But wait, he never sent the text, did he? No, he'd decided to save it – better to ask for forgiveness. His son had been easy enough to placate with a consolation prize – a trip to the aquarium next week – but Hannibal...

"So then you knew," Alana glared, "that Jack was reinforcing Gideon's delusions."

Cocking an antagonistic eyebrow, the alpha opened his desk drawer and drew out a sheaf of paper, tossing them at his indignant colleague.

She frowned, “What’s that?”

“The transcript of Jack Crawford’s interview with Abel Gideon.”

Taking the documents with a suspicious glower at her colleague and a darting glance of concern at the omega, Alana flipped through it, eyes flying across the pages as she read, her frowning deepening the further she went.

Will exhaled, “How long has Jack been investigating Hannibal?”

In the window, the faint outline of their reflected silhouettes exchanged unreadable looks.

Ah.

When Will was a child, he had moved from one clapboard house to another, and every one of them had groaned in the wind, keeping him up into the long stormy nights with fears that the house would fall on him. Even the first omega house at Emory U he’d lived in had made similar noises, a neo-Gothic thing, with walls and floors all wooden and hollow that conversations and sighs became rumbles and the grand chandeliers leftover from the house’s fancier days would squeak on its hinges whenever someone upstairs got the bright idea to jump out of bed or run down the stairs – and his heart with would thump along with it, some primal fear gripping the nape of his neck.

His current house, shared with Hannibal and the kids, was solid stone brick with the kind of foundations that could belong to a bank vault; reinforced, sound-proofed, it’s become his haven from the world and all its distractions.

(“Jack Crawford,” began Alana Bloom, her voice tapering off as she shook her head wearily, “You can’t let this in, Will, Jack thinks he knows what he’s doing but he’s desperate for answers. Believe me, his ideas aren’t popular in the FBI.”

But what she didn’t say was that he had enough credibility as an experienced investigator that the FBI higher-ups would issue a request for Will to come and provoke Gideon in the name of pursuing the truth.)

The omega stood in the dark atrium, letting himself breathe in the familiar scents of home.

(Hannibal’s phantasmal knuckles caressed the curve of his cheek, drawing goosebumps as spectral arms captured his middle, squeezing until it hurt.)

He had driven home in a daze after reassuring Alana that he was fine, irritated by the concern which wafted off her like cheap perfume. Chilton on the other hand to his surprise, understood his need to retreat; as much as Will might want to deny it, the head psychiatrist of Baltimore State was an alpha, who had been brought up around omegas – his ethical code might be blurred but he knew how things went.

Music tickled at his ears, along with the familiar accompaniment of Marie’s perennial humming. The dogs tottered over joyously to greet him, panting and whining, but obeyed readily enough when he petted them and slipped past.

“Marie?”

In the dining room, the Frenchwoman was balanced on a ladder, polishing the black Murano glass chandelier. The glass glistened like obsidian in the ambient lighting she had turned on, casting long sharp crisscrossing shadows across the table, cleared now of breakfast. She peered down at Will with a welcoming smile.

“*Bonjour*,” she sang.

Will nodded a greeting; he’s just home to change before running out to run some errands and pick up Junior. The beta nodded, her smile easy. He smiled back, the expression staying on his face as she asked about his catch up over coffee with his ‘colleague’ and staying there as he lied about it.

(In the corner of his eye, Actaeon, transformed into a stag, screamed as he was set upon by his dogs.

“It’s a birth salver,” Hannibal had explained to him once when he’d finally asked about it. “They're used to hold gifts of food, given by visitors during an omega’s convalescence. I think whoever commissioned the piece thought it would be ironic.”)

“I’m going to drop by the store – anything we’re missing?” He asked, changing the subject.

“Cherries,” she replied immediately, “We need ze cherries, to protect ze cake.”

Of course. How could he forget.

Hannibal had promised Tomas they’d make cherry *clafoutis* tonight; it was one of the children’s favorites but the deceptively easy recipe had turned out tough and chewy when the boy had tried making it on his own last week.

With the experience that came from wrangling four children, the alpha always kept a big bowl of extras on the side to distract any curious little mouths that wandered in and out while he trained their eldest in the secrets of culinary witchery.

Will nodded, “I’ll get cherries.”

Flashing a departing smile, he went to change the dogs’ water bowls, washed his hands and fixed them both a cup of tea, leaving hers on a lacquered tray on the dining table.

As he wandered upstairs breathing in the aromatic steam, he found himself thinking of this morning; wandering down the stairs with a groggy Junior in his arms, Hannibal nuzzling his cheek, kissing the little boy on the head, whispering “Good morning” with quiet esteem, the gesture almost ritualistic.

Your husband, he knows more than he’s telling you, and so does Jack Crawford. You should be careful, Mister Graham…

Will swallowed another gulp of tea, and tried desperately to ignore the trembling in his gut, the slow poisonous chill of uncertainty.

While he appreciated Alana's defense of Hannibal and her reassurance that Jack Crawford's ideas were more conspiracy theories than valid lines of investigation, Hannibal had the right profile.

Thirty to fifty, white male, alpha, educated, socially competent – and of course, surgical experience or know-how.

But so did Chilton, Alana had pointed out, who actually fit the profile better considering the fact that the head psychiatrist of Baltimore State had never been married, had no children, and had no close family; and for that matter, every other local thirty to fifty-year old single white male alpha with a medical degree.

(Chilton rolled his eyes as Alana whirled to face him and asked if he was the Chesapeake Ripper.

"*No*," drawled the psychiatrist, almost scowling in contempt.

Though going by the conspiracy theories that Jack Crawford was entertaining, you might well be next, Alana had declared, though not in so many words.)

There was no point jumping to conclusions.

And more importantly, Hannibal had been vetted, *thoroughly*, by the full force of the FBI when Will had been arrested. But if Hannibal wasn't guilty yet Abel Gideon was telling the truth then…

Will hung up his jacket in the walk-in wardrobe and as he reached to grab a more casual coat, he stroked a hand along the textured sleeves of Hannibal's shirts, hung neatly in their color-coded rows as he considered his choices, lingering over the one he liked the most – before he came back to himself.

Right.

Shower.

Junior.

The store.

Cherries.

Will grabbed the navy peacoat and threw it onto the ottoman.

Unbuttoning his collar, Will crossed the room into the bathroom and flipped on the shower, shedding his clothes before stepping into the downpour. He scrubbed at his face, breathed in the wet heat.

Alana Bloom thought that Gideon was playing a game with Jack.

Chilton thought that Will ought to be warned – *never say I didn't do you any favors* – as he toed the line between his friendship with Hannibal and his friendship with the FBI, ever mindful of the political bottom line.

Jack Crawford believed he'd found his evidence, shaky as it was.

Will got out of the shower and dressed in a hurry, keeping one eye on the time.

Tobias Budge had *no reason* to lie about what he saw.

The abandoned farmhouse in Rappahannock with his high school shop class project hanging over the back porch and the antique skull saw was *real*.

The letters he'd found in the barn had been kept in his trunk until he'd had an opportunity two months ago to sneak them into the house were *real*.

(The letters had been studied, folded into little squares and stuffed inside of an old *A. Lange & Sohne* watch box and 'forgotten' under a stack of documents on the bottom shelf of his safe.)

If he took Gideon's recount with a grain of salt, as some kind of coded message – that the Ripper had taken on his mantle to exonerate him *or*…

Will took a deep slow breath and descended the stairs; there was no one else closer to him than Hannibal, and there were frankly crazier things that an alpha had done to save an omega than pretending to be a serial killer to exonerate them.

His memories of New Orleans were *real*; what he had done, what he'd gotten away with, what he had desperately grasped for in an attempt to stay afloat; the gentlemanly courtship, the long-legged self-assured strides of Hannibal by his side, feet armored in polished leather shoes, his thirty-three years to his twenty-four, the discretely-tailored clothes, that calm brown gaze.

Wasn't it?

Will checked his phone.

There's no new messages.

Downstairs, Marie trailed after him in a flourish of sing-song advice about the gourmet grocery store's ridiculous lines – surely it would be easy enough to hire another underpaid college student, there were certainly plenty of them around – and thrust the brown-bagged snacks she'd put together, in case Junior got peckish. Will smiled his thanks and left, his nervous energy laying coil underneath his skin like static electricity as he pulled out his phone again in the car, his thumb hovering over the virtual keyboard before he shut off the screen and slipped it back into his pocket.

When Hannibal came home, they would talk. But after dinner, he thought, yes, after dinner.

Or not, his specter whispered.

Will pulled out of the driveway and went to pick up his son.

Chapter End Notes

So, I need to say again, thank you for being patient. Since I last posted, I went snorkelling at the Great Barrier Reef to treat myself for a tough year and guess what happened? Yup, tonsillitis, which was untreated for like a week cos at first they thought it was a flu. And I had my periods during it!! The pain of that and fibro meant more insomnia, more lack of concentration and just total brain death. I spiralled back to being depressed, but crawled my way out of it with the help of neuroscience.
I have slept now 3 days in a row around 9pm. And oh my gosh the amount of difference it makes to my ability to write is //staggering// I can finally string a sentence together in my head instead of feeling like i have cotton balls between my ears.
The good thing is, this chapter actually belonged to a much longer version of this chapter, but I cut it for emotional impact, so when I say you'll see more soon, I'm not just saying that - there is actually a rough draft of the next chapter/second half of the old version of this chapter already written

Also, um, if anyone wants to talk to me, I would like more Hannibal friends. But I'm not on tumblr, I don't use Facebook, I don't do twitter. I am on here and I'm on email and g-hangout and have a LJ account I don't really use and that's it. I know, lol I'm kind of a hermit.

Caneja de infundice

Chapter Summary

an early morning wake up three years ago. an interrogation and a conversation. grievances aired and promises made.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone. Long time no post! I have been so busy. I sliced it up the original chapter 23 into two parts due to clashing mood.
Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: September 2013

Jack Crawford watched his coffee made with the same elegant yet brutal movements that he'd seen in autopsy videos. Considering that the man making his coffee used to be a surgeon, he supposed it was to be expected. Somewhere overhead, there was an outraged wail. The unmistakable shrieks of a child throwing a tantrum rumbled down the staircase. Indistinct placating became muffled begging, then erupted into shouting.

"Stop it!" The agent heard Will Graham demand in a brittle voice, "Stop that now Eli!"

A slamming door was heard followed by a loud squealing cry.

Hannibal Lecter glanced overhead with the grimness of someone who expected his lights to start swinging and cracks to appear in the walls. Crawford accepted his coffee graciously, trying to ignore the earthquake above him and the stilted atmosphere of the Lecter kitchen.

"Eli's woken three times with nightmares this week," Hannibal said as he tiredly pulled a lever and adjusted a nozzle, letting the machine genteelly guzzle out another cup. The alpha took a deep drink of the rich dark liquid, his brows furrowed in displeasure at being woken yet again. "The only thing that calms her is if Will sleeps in her bed."

"Again, I'm sorry," Crawford offered awkwardly.

Hannibal gave him a mutinously blank look.

The FBI agent turned away, guilty.

He wondered if this was what would have happened if somehow, Bella and he had managed to have children. Would he have been willing to stay home? Would Bella? His siblings had managed it, landing him with nieces and nephews whom he almost never saw but dutifully sent money to every Christmas and on birthdays. Above them somewhere, Elizabeta Lecter, four-years old, smart as a whip and stubborn as a mule, roared in outrage and heartbreak that Daddy would miss her first day of preschool, overwriting the agent's picturesque fantasies of picnics and tea parties whenever he imagined Will and Hannibal spending time with their daughter.

"What's the case?"

"The Minnesota abductions," said Crawford, then added, "Eight girls from eight different campuses in eight months," in case the alpha needed the reminder.

The very least he could do for the good doctor was tell him what the hell was going on, why this was an emergency.

His friend took another sip of his coffee, expression thunderous as he turned away to open the glass door to the courtyard where the dogs started up their chorus of barks once more, vibrating with the Stranger-Danger rush of being woken by someone at the door in the middle of the night. No doubt there would be another complaint from the neighbors. Crawford took a bracing sip of his coffee, already dreading the phone calls; after the third time, Hannibal and Will began referring their neighbors to complain directly to his private line at the BAU. If they'd just picked up, he sighed, but no; all the phones were unplugged or silenced after 8 PM in the Lecter house.

"Winston, Napolean, down," Hannibal ordered sharply, and then, "I thought there were seven."

The family mutts sat as if their strings had been cut.

Winston and Nap tilted their heads up at the FBI agent curiously when he glanced at them, making snuffling noises. Though they kept shuffling on their front paws, they sat exactly in the spot that Hannibal Lecter had ordered them to sit on as if their butts were glued there. At his amused stare, the smaller one let out a low growl punctuated by a high-pitched bark. The alpha glared at the animal, mouth pinched in irritation. Cowed, the dog scrambled to drop to the floor and placed his head on his paws in submission, whining softly at the back of his throat as he glanced erratically between Crawford and his owner's mate.

It took the agent a second to get back on topic. "There were."

Hannibal finished his coffee and poured himself another cup, "When did you identify the eighth?"

Actually, the detective on Missing Persons detail at Duluth PD had called it in after getting a visit from Elise Nichols' parents. She'd been senior officer in charge for the night shift when the Nichols had burst through the doors in a fluster, having arrived home from their weekend away to visit an ailing relative to find the house empty. After a few hours of questioning and preliminary investigations, Detective Morrow had seized upon the similarities in the girl's

disappearance to the serial abductions mentioned in a FBI bulletin and been on the phone a minute later.

Thank God for small favors, thought Crawford.

“About forty minutes before I showed up at your front door.”

Truthfully, they only had this case because of Will Graham. The bulletins had gone out after the omega connected the dots somehow during several Sunday brunches skimming over the headlines of several papers, a nervous habit picked up during college to keep the other omegas from talking to him at breakfast before he was ready.

His friend held up his refilled cup, silently offering a refill. Jack Crawford shook his head with a wane smile of thanks.

“Abductions,” noted Hannibal lightly, his casual tone incongruous with the topic at hand; Crawford tensed at the tightly-controlled hostility underneath his friend’s calm veneer, “Why do you call them ‘abductions’?”

“Well, until we find a body…” he gestured to the side, apologetic and unapologetic all at once that he’d barged into the Lecter’s home at 5AM in the morning but smart enough to keep his tone light, conversational, because he was on eggshells right now and he damn well knew it.

“At the moment, we have nothing. No bodies. Nothing that comes out of bodies.”

“But why!” They heard Elizabeta scream loudly from upstairs, “I hate you! I hate you!”

Something heavy slammed into the ceiling above them.

Jack Crawford shifted uncomfortably as the sounds petered out again to indistinct sobbing. Hannibal took a deep breath, rubbing at his eyes.

“Papa,” came a meek query.

The alpha mustered up a smile and crossed the kitchen to take the toddler from his eldest child, clucking at the state of Micah’s flushed unhappy face. Hannibal disappeared down the hallway and out of view, presumably to change the two-year old old and calm him. Tomas Lecter gave the FBI agent in his kitchen a dull look, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

“Hi Uncle Jack,” the boy said gloomily, and shuffled behind the counter to get a glass of water. He sipped it slowly, gaze vacant from the early hour.

“Hi Tomas.”

Jack Crawford shifted from his left foot to his right foot in the silence.

Upstairs, there’s a furious shriek. Tomas took another sip of water, his hands jerking a little despite the blank expression on his face.

“I’ve had enough,” Will shouted distantly, and a moment later, was coming down the stairs.

Jack Crawford exhaled in relief.

Tomas put down his glass and went to his father, falling easily into the omega for an embrace. Will Graham kissed his son’s hair and squeezed tightly, face buried into the mussed dark locks. It took him a few seconds to realize that the omega was whispering “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I’m sorry, sweetheart,” again and again into his son’s hair.

Jack Crawford looked away and took another sip of his coffee, suddenly feeling very tired.

It took several more minutes to go out the door, as in his haste to get away from his daughter’s hysterics, Will Graham had left his go-bag upstairs. There was also a terrifying moment when Micah tried to vault himself out of his Pater’s arms in his attempt to cling to his omega-father, which made Crawford’s heart skip a beat, wondering for a split second if the boy’s distress at Will’s departure was going to end in a tragedy. Thankfully, Hannibal’s reflexes had reacted in time. The child was taken indoors by his brother, each boy receiving a kiss on the forehead in goodbye.

“I’m sorry you’re getting stuck with everything today,” he heard Will say as he walked away to give the couple a moment to say their goodbyes.

“This can’t continue, Will,” he heard Hannibal say flatly, resigned.

“I know. I’m sorry,” the omega mumbled. “I’ll try to get home early.”

Jack Crawford got into the SUV and shut the door. Through the window, he saw the alpha scent the best goddamn profiler to ever grace the BAU’s hallways. Hannibal Lecter ran a hand through his mate’s hair. Both started at the intrusion of their moment by the little girl with the flushed tear-streaked face who’d gotten over her fury in the face of her omega-father’s impending disappearance to collect her goodbye hug and kiss.

The agent forced himself to look ahead and start the car engine.

The Present

“I imagine that it’s easier to believe that I’m responsible for the murders than it is to accept responsibility,” the beta smiled, somewhere between contemptuous and wistful.

Clean-shaven and dressed in a grey suit offset by an equally monotonous sweater-vest in a shade of oatmeal, the suspect exuded embittered amusement. He didn’t look like a killer, but then neither did Will.

Neither does Hannibal but according to Jack Crawford, that’s the point…

A flare of phantom panic roared to life in the pit of his belly and was ruthlessly squashed. Will swallowed a mouthful of coffee, almost too hot to drink, and forced himself to keep on task.

Hidden by the darkness of the observation room, he studied Ingram.

A wiry beta man with vaguely pleasant and unmemorable features, Clark Ingram looked like an archetype of the middle-class beta male as he sat there in the seat, leaning forward with his hands on the table *(I got nothing to hide, I'm here to help*) – shoulders neither broad nor narrow, cleanly dressed in a branded suit, good quality but nothing audacious, the kind of semi-casual professional wear that a clerk would wear. He was forgettable; his clothes, his speech, his gait – unlike Hannibal, who drew attention with his pocket-squares and beautifully-patterned handcrafted suits. If the man had brushed past him on the street, Will doubted he would have paid the beta much notice – he looked harmless, the sort of guy that a woman would ask to hold her purse while she pulled up the slipping strap on her shoe, someone whom omegas would smile at as he held the door for them.

"Strangely I'm not even surprised; his sort of traumatic brain injury can make someone more vulnerable to psychological disorders."

"Post-concussion syndrome."

"Yes," the beta's mouth quirked, "you know how it can be. At first it was just confusion, but then came paranoia, rage, the usual. Would have reported him earlier if I'd known."

Showing exactly why he was the BAU's head investigator, Edward Moses played along with the man's attempts to change the atmosphere of the conversation, somehow drumming up a good-humored smile.

Beside the agent, Alana Bloom was a silent sentinel, her arms crossed on the table as she borrowed the body language of an unimpressed teen, for all intents and purposes looking more like the agent's tagalong than a highly-respected psychiatrist; as Will expected, Ingram had dismissed her – doctor title or not, she was obviously not important here – within moments of introductions, and focused instead on selling his friendly 'fellow government employee' persona to the Special Supervisory Agent.

"You don't seem to feel sorry for your ex-client," the psychiatrist noted, voice dry.

The first words spoken by Alana Bloom since the interview began, they had their intended impact, disrupting the narrative that the social worker had so cunning tried to weave. Will almost smiled.

The man took a beleaguered breath, his smile veering dangerously into sarcasm territory.

"My ex-client is a serial killer."

"Alleged, Mister Ingram," Alana quipped, her smile practiced; "There was never a trial."

He hid it well but there's a small flicker of derision.

“Of course. Allegedly,” the man conceded with a grin made to charm. “Nevertheless I’m entitled to my opinion and you’ll forgive me if I’m annoyed that you’ve taken his accusations this far.”

Will didn’t hear the click of the observation room door being opened, and almost jumped when he finally noticed that he had his own audience. Agent Jack Crawford was an unsubtle figure, even as he flattened himself against the doorframe to squeeze inside. Will nodded neutrally and went back to the interview in progress, but realized with a sinking feeling that his focus had already been reframed. In the low lighting, he noted despite himself the unshaven jaw, the wrinkled suit, the twisted tie, that faint aroma of stale coffee stains; Jack Crawford had left the hospital this morning, and come straight into work.

Tick-tock.

Bella Crawford’s imminent death was the only reason Alana Bloom hadn’t flown out of the carpark of Baltimore State yesterday to confront the alpha.

“Agent Crawford,” he greeted neutrally.

“Will,” the alpha paused, awkwardness filling the spaces between them. “Doctor Chilton told me that he explained, but I thought…”

“You don’t have to explain.”

Crawford studied him with a frown.

“Abel Gideon made accusations, the FBI is only being thorough.”

The unspoken accusation that the agent hadn’t extended the same courtesy when it had been Will, whom the alpha had known as a colleague and a friend, hit its target exactly as intended, drawing a wince.

Divided by the two-way mirror, Alana Bloom stared across the length of the table, her smile cool. “Peter Bernadone is psychologically damaged.”

“That doesn’t stop one from behaving criminally,” replied Ingram, voice smooth as silk.

You have an answer for everything, don’t you?

“His condition makes him easy to manipulate.”

The beta male gave her a measured stare, his irritation stirring beneath the surface of his genial expression before dismissing her; underneath the genteel exasperation and carefully pleasant expressions, Clark Ingram sneered, secure upon the reality that he had gotten away with it before.

“Someone framed you, Will,” Jack Crawford whispered, his eyes flinty and determined as he stared unseeing through the observation window, “I can’t change what happened to you but I’ve *never* stopped looking.”

Oh but you need to stop.

Will closed his eyes momentarily.

“You investigated Hannibal yourself. *Thoroughly*. Did you find anything?” He asked, the softness of his question belying the venom behind it.

From the interview room, Clark Ingram sighed, “So once again I’m being held on the word of one very damaged individual.”

“As his social worker, you’re in a position of trust.”

“I don’t appreciate what you’re implying.”

Hidden in the observation room, Jack Crawford swallowed, the silence stretching until finally he shook his head.

Will turned away to resume his observation and nodded, his streak of vindication undercut by the anxiety that continued to gnaw its way through his belly.

“You went through every fiber of every stitch of clothing,” he said softly, enunciating each word so that there would be no mistake, nothing but crisp clarity, hating how much he revelled in the crestfallen expression that fluttered across Jack Crawford’s embittered face, but unable to help himself because how *dare* Jack do this, just when things were good, when things were *handled* – “You took his blood, his fingerprints, his goddamn DNA – and you found *nothing*.”

“No one is implying anything,” Moses soothed, “though I hope you understand why we have to follow up.”

With one last frosty smile aimed at Alana Bloom, Ingram straightened.

When he shifted to look at the FBI agent, his expression’s almost warm. “Of course, you’ve got to do your job after all.”

Despite Ingram’s clear wishes that he could go back to talking to Moses, the FBI agent took his arms off the table and crossed them, effectively excusing himself from active participation. Will’s mouth quirked in approval at the flicker of discontent on Ingram’s face; sour irritation crept into the beta’s shallow charm.

“He did it so well…” Crawford inhaled, “There wasn't even an orgy of evidence. There was just enough to convince me.”

He slanted a cool glance at the agent.

“That’s the point of framing someone.”

Jack Crawford began to chuckle, a soft rattling that petered out into a bitter croak. “I envy your certainty about him.”

“You used to be certain.”

They had been friends, with Hannibal trusting Jack Crawford to look after Will while they’d been in the field and Jack depending on Hannibal to tell him where the line was, when to pull back. That had all fallen apart in the aftermath of the arrest, and despite coming over for dinner a few times during Will’s convalescence with Junior, the relationship remained strained. Though, it appeared this strain was more due to Jack’s aversion with being in the same room as someone he suspected of being a murderous mastermind rather than any lingering resentment on Hannibal’s part.

“You seem deeply affected by the experience,” Alana observed, breaking Will out of his thoughts and drawing him back to the interview in progress.

Struggling to understand where the conversation had drifted to during his lapse in concentration, Will grimaced and tried yet again to ignore Crawford. Draining the rest of his coffee, he dropped the empty paper cup in the trash.

“I enjoyed being a social worker before I met Peter,” said Ingram, “He masqueraded as a vulnerable member of society to escape suspicion then accused me of his crimes – so yes, I am deeply affected by the experience.”

Too calm. He was too calm.

In the observation room, Jack Crawford stepped closer, then hesitated, clearly reconsidering whatever he had been about to say.

“So,” the alpha began tentatively, “this is the Alexandria Strangler.”

Beyond the glass, Clark Ingram smiled charmingly. “These aren’t new accusations.”

Grudgingly Will answered, “Yes.”

Crawford nodded slowly, making a sweeping study of the plainly-attired beta.

“He’s being charged?”

Inhaling, the omega felt a swell of frustration so strong that he had to squeeze his own hands and force them into his pockets to stop himself from banging on the glass. Crawford watched the gesture but made no comment, simply turning back to observing the interview.

No, they weren’t charging him. *Obviously*. A theory was not conclusive proof.

“I’m not surprised there’s no record,” Clark Ingram was telling his interviewers, his smile unwaveringly polite. “The investigator at the time realized very quickly that they were based on delusions more than anything concrete.”

***No** , the evidence had been there. No one had looked. No one had wanted to look.*

Will fisted his hands in his pockets until they ached.

This interview was going nowhere. What had he expected? There was no guilt to exploit, no nerves to unsettle; the beta knew what he was, knew what he liked and how to get it, his appetite developed and refined over the course of nineteen dead bodies, and possibly more.

Clark Ingram was a monster set in his ways.

There are other ways of influence than violence; but violence is what they understand, his shadow reminded him sagely.

Shush.

Will licked his dry lips.

"The FBI spoke to me at the time of Peter's arrest. I'd given them my details but when no one followed up with me, I assumed that it wasn't a requirement – so to answer the question," Clark Ingram smiled, "No, I'm afraid I don't have an alibi to offer; three years is a long time."

Will glared at the beta, hatred blossoming into an explosion of brackish thorns as he read the lack of remorse, the vainglorious revelry, and closed his eyes as a sudden swell of vertigo hit him. It was too much; the primal pain of Peter's betrayal, the desperate anger, to claw and hit and tear; the heavy suffocating fog of Alana's compassion thwarted; Ingram's sadistic delight.

Some people are beyond rehabilitation.

"Will?" Crawford frowned, shuffling closer awkwardly, "Will, hey…are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Actually, he hadn't slept well last night – or any night for that matter, since his little tête-à-tête with Gideon. He felt a faint hysteria creep up on him; maybe Hannibal had the right idea of it, telling him to avoid the other alpha.

Tentatively, Crawford placed a hand on his shoulder, a touch so gentle Will had to strain to feel it.

"Come on," the older man sighed, "You can watch the recording later, you look like you need some air."

Despite knowing that this was quite possibly going to turn into an interrogation, he allowed Jack Crawford to walk him out of the observation room, down the corridor and up to the roof.

"Agent Crawford could use a friend, Mister Graham," Gideon's disembodied voice drawled into his ear. Yes, yes, one thing at a time.

It took a minute of deep breathing before he decided to rip off the bandage, because he needed to know more if he was going to control this, and because he hated all the little details that crammed themselves into the furrows of Jack Crawford's troubled face, practically daring him to ask.

“At least tell me why.”

Was it something that he had said? Had he tried to use misdirection to guard against Crawford and somewhere along the way it had all gone wrong?

The alpha turned away to lean upon the balustrade of the roof, his face tilted towards the sun as he contemplated his answer, which came out slowly, softly, with the roughness of unpolished honesty. “One of the first things you told me when we first started working together, was that you hated psychiatrists since you were a kid. At the time, I thought it was amusing, that you ended up married to a psychiatrist but I told myself, must be love.”

The alpha paused.

“When everything happened the way it did…” Crawford’s voice petered off, as he struggled to find the right words.

When you very publicly lost your mind, Will silently amended, because there was no right way to say this.

The alpha started and stopped several times, but ended up swallowing the words each time, finding them all paltry and unwieldy. Seemingly losing his steam, the alpha leaned heavily upon the balustrade, far out enough that he seemed to hit some midpoint between standing on the roof and falling to his death, his eyes unseeing but nevertheless taking in the steady drift of bodies in and out, the brick pathways, benches and shrubbery that made up the frontage to the building. The pose reminded Will of someone sick and getting ready to hurl.

“You told me once that the Chesapeake Ripper chose his victims for their undignified behaviour,” said Crawford, a bit of his usual bluster bolstering his words, “And from what I know, the Enforcer murders were similarly motivated. And I know for a fact that Hannibal was in New Orleans for all the murders.”

Of course Hannibal had been there, he had been *Will’s* alibi. A slow winding panic began to twist in his stomach, something sharp and wistful tinged with the rebuke of shame. Outwardly he joined Crawford in his contemplation of the FBI carpark beyond the small cluster of decorative trees ahead, mirroring the man’s pose.

“I thought you said there were victims in D.C. and Chicago.”

Crawford nodded.

“And you’re just going to ignore that.”

The alpha slanted a wry look at him, a glimmer of humor shining through the man’s usual no-nonsense, “It’s been over ten years; getting proof that someone was somewhere he said he wasn’t isn’t easy.”

Will smiled faintly, then let it fade.

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

Whatever lightness Jack Crawford had managed to muster up slipped away.

“I asked you once if the Butcher and the Ripper could have communicated, but later I found myself thinking – what if they’re the same person?”

Well, *he* certainly wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper, so that puts a nail in that theory.

It didn’t make this any less dangerous though; an inquiry into Hannibal was an inquiry into him.

Will shook his head, his chuckle mirthless, “*Where* are you getting this, Jack?”

Crawford smiled, a small melancholy thing that disappeared with the breeze as his eyes tracked the hurried departure of three agents in a standard-issue SUV.

“About a year ago, a case landed on my desk – people were getting mauled, by a prehistoric animal if you can believe it. The killer turned out to be a young museum staffer named Randall Tier, thought himself an animal trapped in human form. Can you guess who his psychiatrist was?”

He mentally scoffed. Any decent psychiatrist worth their credentials were practically guaranteed to have an entire collective of troubled individuals among their clients.

“Hannibal has the right profile.”

“Chilton has the same profile.”

The alpha inclined his head, conceding the point, “Not many ex-surgeons have been as involved in the BAU’s work as Hannibal was, due to your role in our investigations.”

“Chilton,” Will countered, “He’s worked on the Ripper case before.”

Crawford fell silent, brows furrowed.

“Answer this for me, Jack; if Hannibal's the Ripper, what's he doing with his trophies?”

Where would he hide them? Will slept in his bed, ate his food, shared a closet with him; every week, the children, Marie, Irene, the cleaners would go in and out of the rooms, rifling through the drawers, poking through the fridges and cupboards. The only times that Hannibal might be alone was at his office, or downstairs in the butler kitchen, as the study was a shared space. Was the alpha somehow passing through walls too? Scaling the chimneys?

“I don’t know.”

“Why would he frame me and draw the FBI’s attention like that? What possible reason could the Ripper have to want to be under the microscope of the FBI?”

Crawford shook his head tiredly, “I don’t know.”

Actually, Will could think of a few reasons. Maybe they had gotten sick of each other and throwing him in jail was easier than a divorce – oh the *drama*, an omega leaving an alpha or an alpha abandoning an omega, monetary losses and psychological trauma to the children aside. It was rude, by the Ripper's standards, but perhaps Will had been 'rude' enough to warrant it. Possibly they had been in on it together, two killers pitting themselves against the full force of the FBI. Or the evidence had been real, not planted, just as he had been truly ill, and Junior's conception had meant that Hannibal – killer or not – had dirtied his hands to save him.

There were a lot of 'if's in the scenarios, with multiple qualifying conditions that had to be met before the narrative resemble anything like the tale that Jack Crawford was trying to sell him.

The older man took a deep breath and changed the subject. "Why Clark Ingram?"

"What?"

"Why are you sure he's your guy? He's a social worker, no criminal history, no history of antisocial behavior. Besides his link to Sarah Craber through Bernadone, he's got no links to any of the identified victims, and there's enough degrees of separation between him and the Strangler's victims that he might as well be a stranger."

"Still keeping track of me, Jack?"

Crawford smiled, a warm expression, "Concern from an old friend."

The thing was, Will could believe it. Crawford certainly did.

"We have a witness," he admitted, choosing to omit the fact Peter hadn't so much 'told' them as hinted at being framed by someone whose words on his sanity or lack thereof had weight, and that Will had put the rest together himself.

But it seemed Crawford knew him better than he would have guessed from what he knew of their prior relationship, as the older man threw him a knowing look. "There's no evidence, is there? Not anything they can use."

Flashing the alpha a wane smile, he turned to leave.

"Will," the alpha called after him, abandoning his perch to trail after his younger colleague. "This job doesn't lend itself to optimism, but I'm trying."

Turning slightly, Will studied Crawford's grizzled jawline, the 5-o'clock stubble that was edging unfashionably into downright scruffy. Sincerity practically bled from the man's haggard features.

"Alana is right. Everything I have is circumstantial," the agent exhaled, "I know what I'm looking at is a pattern – but right now, I have *nothing* concrete or otherwise to prove to myself or anyone else that Hannibal was involved. No forensics. No paper trail. No connections. Nothing except what my instincts are telling me."

Just like what your instincts are telling you about Ingram.

“Did you know that Jack Crawford is investigating you?” He said, changing the subject, unable to help himself, unable to keep it in any longer. He regretted it a moment later but it’s too late now; it almost felt good, a relief to share what had been bothering him in the past week since his interview with Abel Gideon. Behind them, the torrential rain drummed on against the thick sound-insulated cavern of Hannibal’s office.

“And I don’t mean the investigation from two years ago,” he muttered, rubbing his fingers together, feeling the dampness between them from his glass of whiskey on the rocks, “I mean, active, ongoing…”

His mate’s movements paused for a second. If the alpha’s expression flickered at all, it happened too fast for him to catch.

“I expected as much,” Raising his glass to his lips and taking a considering sip of his brandy, Hannibal licked his mouth and pondered the liquid in the low warm glow of the fire, a pinch to his distinctive brows that made Will vaguely uneasy.

“You knew.”

“No,” the alpha’s lips thinned in displeasure, “though it seemed a safe assumption. Jack is very stubborn; part of what makes him a good investigator, and a loyal friend.”

In the quiet, Hannibal cupped the brandy between his hands before taking another sip. The second taste seemed to impress the alpha more than the first, drawing an almost imperceptible smile from the reserved man.

Will studied his husband’s calm with something close to resentment. “You don’t care that he’s prying into our lives?”

Hannibal’s eyes flicked to his, “Should I?”

Unable to answer that without giving too much away, the omega glanced to the side. The neat, almost austere presentation left each evening on Hannibal’s office desk and sketching table seemed to taunt him; the bills all paid and neatly set aside in their folder, the pencils set neatly parallel sketch pad, fountain pen capped and artfully placed atop one of Hannibal’s moleskin notebooks, a stack of color-coded patient notes in identical moleskin A4s ready to be filed away. All of it made him think of his disorganized desk in the home study, the hastily buried copy of Abel Gideon’s full FBI file among the documents.

Irene was at the house tonight. The children were enjoying a plain dinner of spaghetti and cake followed by a fashion parade and final adjustments to their Halloween costumes for

Monday. They were probably missing their dinner reservations but Will felt too drained to even muster up the energy to think about food.

“You have to excuse Jack for his obsession. He’s unable to let go of the past. I don’t blame him. What happened is something that is hard to let go of.”

“What? That he was wrong?” The omega chuckled darkly at his own joke.

His husband smiled, the expression not quite reaching his eyes. While he was glad the subject no longer rubbed at Will, that Will had forgiven – no need to forget, he had already forgotten after all – Hannibal remembered everything far too well.

“A rarity for the likes of Jack Crawford.”

Will shifted on the padded Baroque chair Hannibal had pulled out for him and drain the last of his whiskey, the full exhaustion of his day pouring into his limbs the longer he sat there by the fireplace, comforted by the trappings of Hannibal’s lavish workspace, the way it was infused with the alpha’s refinement and eccentricities, his scent.

“Is that your professional opinion?”

Hannibal regarded him with fond rebuke and stood, disappearing to his desk.

“You represent the highest point of his career, and the lowest,” the alpha mused, sounding philosophical; Will couldn’t help but note the slight pique behind the casual remarks. “With you by his side, Jack Crawford was almighty in the hallowed halls of the BAU.”

Will felt his chest rumble in laughter. There was nothing hallowed about what he did. The investigators who came calling in the months he’d been back at Quantico, who emailed and sent thick manila folders to the BAU with politely-worded cover letters which somehow ended up redirected to his desk, and showed up unannounced for private consultations were often restless and frustrated, swivelling on the padded conference chairs, trying not to fiddle with their file, with the coffee cup, every single one of them impatient for him to pull a name out of a hat, to fix things – a motive, a name, a description, an answer. Sometimes they wanted vindication, sometimes closure. Mostly they wanted Will to give them what they needed, as quickly as possible, and consistently failed to listen when he tried to discuss the profile further, to explain the process so they’d learn, so they’d make *different* mistakes.

That’s the problem with having a reputation.

“Everyone has an expectation.”

Yes.

Will blinked, startled that he’d said that aloud, that Hannibal had already known the answer though he shouldn’t be surprised at all, should he. A sudden tenderness came over him as he glanced back at the alpha, the golden satiny weave of the Cavalli tie glimmering at Hannibal’s throat, the cow licks brushing over that prominent forehead, styled locks loosened during their passionate greeting at Hannibal’s office door. Thirteen years and counting, he

breathed. Hannibal caught his gaze as he took the empty tumbler from Will's slack fingers and dutifully poured another finger of whiskey. Nearly fourteen years, Will thought as he murmured his thanks, eyes lingering on the terse smile pulling at the edges of Hannibal's lips.

"Agent Moses visited me today," remarked Hannibal as he retook his seat, swirling his brandy slowly in the globe of the crystal snifter. His tone of voice, bright and aloof, understated, immediately put Will on guard.

"He wanted me to do a psychological profile of a case he's been working on."

"The family annihilator case?"

"Yes. Among other things."

Will took a sip of his whiskey and fell silent.

Hannibal shifted to face him. Something unsaid, complicated and smeared with past regrets and the lingering sting of betrayal unfurled between them in the ambience of the fire. The weight of the alpha's eyes pooled in the hollows of his breast bone. He wasn't surprised when Hannibal opened his mouth and said, "Will," in that stiff displeased tone of voice reserved for beginning discussions in which the alpha anticipated a lack of cooperation. The alpha used it sparingly but Will had already learned to hate it.

"I know we've talked about this," he interrupted, trying to head off the conversation before it continued, shivering under the invisible pressure that came over him. "But–"

"While I'm willing to entertain the need for your expertise on certain cases, you cannot allow the BAU to dictate your whereabouts, Will," Hannibal said coldly, vibrating with tempered frustrations. "Last time, Jack gave me his word that he'd protect your headspace, yet he left you to your own mental devices."

His hand shot out without his agreement to grab the alpha's knee, trying to stop his husband saying anything else. *Please*, he almost begged, *please don't be mad,* already suffocating under the oppressive heft of Hannibal's anger and hurt.

As if he had heard him, the alpha took a sharp breath and lowered his voice. "I won't allow history to repeat itself."

"It won't."

Hannibal fixed him with a doubtful frown.

Will glanced away.

What Alana had described to him, the crazy workload that he'd attempted to wade through prior to his slip into temporary madness, it had been impossible to maintain; he's not surprised that Hannibal's patience had run out. He had slept with one eye open and a permanently-packed overnight bag, breezing in the door only to dump his clothes in the hamper, kiss the children, kiss Hannibal, before he was out the door again with his bag of fresh boxers and socks, chauffeured to the next crime scene, the next crime lab, the next

flight, the next regional office or police station. His life had been chaos; it was probably the reason why he'd forgotten to use birth control. While he no longer remembered why he let Jack Crawford get into his head and use him like that, his ulterior motives or otherwise didn't matter in the face of Hannibal's abject hurt, that Will had abandoned him to help perfect strangers.

The omega knew how it must look. Two months back at work and already, an interstate trip, *Abel Gideon*, one closed case, two open cases and a visit from Agent Moses requesting more hours, *more* out of state trips, just more. It was the disaster of three years past starting all over again.

His skin trembled as the alpha's hands found his and unhooked his fingers from where they were digging into the material of Hannibal's trousers. The alpha cupped his hand between his own protectively. Will squeezed back as if it were hurting him.

Hannibal sighed, his eyes soft with the years between them despite the severe set of his mouth.

"Spending each day immersed in the worst of what the world has to offer is not conducive to peaceful sleep. You need your sleep, Will."

Defensiveness rose up inside of him but dispersed as it splintered against the unhappy edges etched sharply across his mate's face.

Will's stomach sank.

This wasn't some disagreement over wounded alpha ego, the alpha vying with the outside world or the children for his omega's attention. No, his husband made very few demands of him, the responsibilities of their life together stacked in his favor to accommodate his career and his moods because Hannibal too thought that what he did was important – to a point.

Now, his husband was telling him where the line was.

Do you want me to quit, he wanted to ask but was too afraid to. For the countless time in the last few months, he considered what would happen if he disappeared beneath the eaves that Hannibal had built around them. Playdoh muffins and Lego fortresses, afternoons in the park taking the dogs on long looping walks. In a blink, all that was submerged by the vision of himself in jeans stained at the knees with grass smears, surprised by the FBI while sitting on the park benches placed strategically along the circumference of the playground, handcuffed to the scandalized titters of the other parents, to his children's confused and frightened pleas. The distinct aroma of Baltimore State, intermingling odors of harsh cleaning products and human exertion assaulted his nostrils.

Will took a hasty sip of his whiskey, trying to kill the memory.

Distantly in his ear, Hannibal kept talking, his voice conciliatory despite the thread of steel beneath them, anger and hurt cooled and hardened into an immovable lump. While he didn't appreciate being kept out of the loop when the omega knew what happened last time he'd decided to keep secrets, Hannibal saw no point in emotionally draining tirades; Abel Gideon

was dangerous and Will would tell him next time an interview was arranged, no excuses. The alpha only wanted the best for him, for their family. Tomas was having issues sleeping recently, did Will know? Their eldest worried, he was so much like you – *don't make a liar out of me.*

"I was going to call," he tried to explain, flustered by the heightened emotions. The argument that what he did saved lives seemed trite and false when any information gained from Gideon leading to an arrest was a long-shot at best.

"I don't want to police your involvement with the BAU, Will, but I won't have you giving into every request made by whoever has Agent Moses' number."

Will could only nod.

His anger mollified by his omega's acquiescence, Hannibal took a deep breath and reached over to tuck a lock of hair behind his omega's ear, the tension of his face melting away as he cupped his beloved's face. "What I'm asking for isn't unreasonable, Will," murmured the alpha, "The FBI have functioned adequately for decades without you, and I refuse to believe that the BAU cannot work a case on their own."

No, but he did speed up the process remarkably.

Outwardly, Will nodded again, wanting the entire conversation to just be over already.

To his relief, his silent assent seemed to be the signal that Hannibal was waiting for because the alpha kissed him fondly and withdrew to finish his brandy. The omega took a slow deep breath as he raised his drink to his lips just to have something to do, nagged by an unformed aimless anxiety.

"I changed our dinner reservations. If we leave in the next fifteen minutes," the alpha checked his wristwatch, his mood sanguine once more, "we will be right on time."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to eclectic for checking in with me and kyuu for being good company.
So it's been three months since I last posted. I wrote a lot of part 23 and 24 within two weeks of posting the last chapter though, but I just couldn't finish two small scenes i needed no matter what, cos I was simply too exhausted.
I became a cat nanny for FIVE cats (two strays taken in by my neighbors - who are dealing with cancer in the family and so couldn't get them spayed in time and well, yes,

kittens, three adorable fluff balls) along with the usual litter box clean ups and scheduled flea bombings. Then I had a cruise with my grandparents for their 85th which I couldn't get out of, and made me sooo stressed I ended up with a fever the first night onboard which turned into a horrid chest infection that lasted through the trip and 3 weeks post-trip, and as soon as I returned home I was dealing with medical administrative akdfladeh (within five days of my return home I had been to seven medical appointments, SEVEN, some of them being an hour to 90min long)
Ugh
But I love the kittens, they're nearly 10 weeks old now and almost ready for homes!
So I came back and started writing again. You will see the entire story, since I actually do know what happens and the ending. Fear not. I hate unfinished works.

Morcela

Chapter Summary

> Quid quo pro, a weekend for family, an unexpected phone call, a dangerous gamble, murder.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> “If you’re worried that I’m going to tell the world how you were suspected of being a serial killer, rest assured, I’ve already been subjected to the third-degree by the FBI attorneys,” smiled Lounds, voice-pitched to the affected sweetness that one used for children and the elderly. “Until the Butcher is behind bars, you are a material witness; and as such, it’s considered interference of a federal investigation to mention you in my articles.”
>
> *Trust me,* her deep blue eyes lied.
>
> The omega snorted under his breath, taking a desultory sip of his drink. As if his aversion to her could be overcome by honeyed promises and a bit of alpha body language.
>
> No legal documentation would hold her back if Freddie Lounds thought there was notoriety or money to be made by going back on those promises; even jail time wouldn’t be enough dissuade her, not if the payoff was big enough.
>
> “Not my case.”
>
> “It might not be your case right now, but it will be; he’s killed ten people in the span of five weeks, drawing a lot of media attentional – and public opinion of the FBI is taking a real nosedive.”
>
> He suppressed a shudder. Even with no details but what he couldn’t help overhearing – two families with parents and accompanying sets of three children under the age of ten, all single shots to the heads except for the omegas – the murders chilled him. Frankly it bothered him that the FBI had contacted his husband for help; Hannibal as a consultant opened the possibility for Will to offer his opinion on the case – they were married, there would be talk in the bedroom regarding the cases, they both had clearance after all – but avoided the complications of having an omega profiler be officially attached.
>
> Some paper pusher with the ear of the Director probably thought it up while lunching with the assholes from Legal.
>
> “Since I don’t have a Masters in Criminology, I had to do my own research; we’ve never had one of these, have we? A serial killer who prefers whole families.” Shameless, Lounds thrust

her recorder under his chin, almost clipping her drink in her enthusiasm, “Family annihilator is as close a description as we’ve got but those are typically fathers; he’s not a father, he just likes killing entire families. Care to make a comment?”

Pushing the device away with a grimace, Will eyed the exit.

“I’m thinking of naming him the Tooth Fairy. Because you know, he likes to bite.”

Tasteless.

The omega took another sip of his drink, using it to control the vitriol that lay coiled like barbed springs on his tongue.

The emails had started the day after he came back from Gloucester, followed shortly by attempts to reach him through the Academy switchboard. He’d declined the calls, bewildered that the woman actually thought there was even a chance in hell that he would speak to her about anything, much less an active case.

Exiting the restroom to see the alpha sitting there coquettishly with a glossy magazine in hand, pretending to be interested in ‘*Fifteen Fall Favorites for The Family Feast*,’ had been an unpleasant surprise. His only option had been to lead the stubborn redhead to the Jefferson hotel bar, as there was no way he was allowing her to see that Kathy Prescott was his lunch companion; it wouldn’t be below the woman to use her acquaintance with the beta to insert herself into their plans.

“This is my day off,” he said coldly.

“And I’ll let you get back to it as soon as I can.”

He smiled thinly at her presumption.

“I’m not interested in being manipulated by you.”

Freddie Lounds smiled, an expression so plastic it might as well be inflatable, and took a sly sip of her pink cocktail through the straw she’d requested. When she put the drink down, there was a red stain on the thin plastic tube.

“I hear that you have a suspect for the Alexandria Strangler; Clark Ingram.”

Will frowned at the change in subject – his pointing of the finger at Ingram was not public knowledge.

Idly stirring the ice in her drink, Lounds gave him a meaningful look, “I thought the name sounded familiar and then I remembered – Peter Bernadone, that beta suspected of killing fifteen women. Ingram was his social worker, wasn’t he? *Funny* how that worked out.”

She was at fault, whether she admitted it or not - her articles about him, thinly veiled as they had been, had cast the BAU in poor public opinion, which ultimately led to the hatchet job investigation on the murders, leading the FBI to focus on the wrong man.

“I understand that he’s been interviewed, but given the FBI nothing actionable and acknowledged only vagaries.” The redhead cocked her head to the side, her smile taking on an ingratiating quality. “Correct me if I’m wrong but the FBI need more than vagaries.”

“*You’d* like to help expedite Clark Ingram’s arrest,” He deadpanned.

“Well,” Lounds shrugged a shoulder, her chagrin as fake as her perm, “I’m willing to offer my services in return for your exclusive on the Tooth Fairy.”

There was no way she found out all of this from some anonymous source. The FBI must have secretly reached out to her already, and instead of agreeing to help, Lounds was here, with him, using his investment in the case as leverage to gain what in her opinion was a more pertinent resource than the Bureau.

Those assholes in Legal, a wry voice quipped, sounding suspiciously like Hannibal.

“If you’re smart, you’d use me. I have resources, contacts,” smiled Lounds, brazen to the end, “Let's not forget; I’ve previously assisted the BAU on investigations; in fact, if I recall correctly, I put *my life* at risk writing that article about Abel Gideon.”

He finished his drink, swallowing down the acerbic comment that sizzled up from his gut.

“And I suppose I just have to ignore the fact that you have your own agenda.”

The redhead rolled her eyes.

“Yes, you’ve caught me; I have an agenda,” Lounds said tartly. “*Living*.”

Well, she was the preferred victim type, so fair enough.

It was not a bad idea. The idea of her even thinking that they were a ‘team’ was repugnant, but this farce had gone on long enough; the truth of what had been done to Peter needed to be rectified, and Ingram needed to be *stopped*.

Maybe she’ll get killed this time, his shadow whispered.

Will’s mouth quirked. *You know what they say – better luck next time.*

“Do you have something substantial to contribute or just an opinion?”

Freddie Lounds smiled brightly, glad that the omega was finally seeing her point of view. Her eyes were already darkening with greed at the thought of what she could do with someone like Will Graham in her pocket. He might be half-mad but all the geniuses were, weren’t they? Omegas were easy, he read her in her intent gaze, so emotionally driven, so much heart that it interfered with their heads – and that’s how she got them. If this omega wanted her to give a damn, then she’ll give a damn – and smile all the way to the bank.

“The FBI can’t pursue the suspect without the suspect crying harassment. I won’t have the same problem. Consider me your eyes and ears.”

Will rolled the chilled tumbler between his fingers.

“Entrapment is illegal, Miss Lounds.”

“Lucky for me then,” Raising her cocktail, she tipped it at him in a sardonic toast, “I’m not part of the FBI.”

He shook his head, not sure if he was disturbed by her conceit or amused by it.

“He’ll come after you.”

And technically, he hadn’t agreed to anything.

Clinking her glass to his empty one, the redhead smirked, cocksure, already having calculated the risks and finding them acceptable for the gains.

“Everyone loves a survival story.”

So that's how it was going to be. He smiled thinly, his tolerance depleted.

Will stood and waved the waiter over. “Goodbye, Miss Lounds, enjoy your lunch.”

“Are you buying?” she asked, coy.

Was he?

“Yes Mister Lecter?” The young man smiled.

He was.

“Put the drinks and Miss Lounds' lunch on my account.”

It’s mean, and right after the bartender nodded brightly and advised him that of course, that was absolutely fine Mister Lecter, have a good day, and Will walked away, he felt the consequences almost immediately; a hot blustery sensation that crawled over his skin as he hurried back to the hotel restaurant, until his neck and jaw were flushed with irritation and reproach.

Had he really just done *that* ? Flashed his wealth in front of *Lounds*? The urge to make her inferior through showing off his social capital sat in his chest like a cold slimy thing. It didn’t matter that the alpha was probably patting herself on the shoulder for a job well done in securing a leisurely lunch on someone else’s dime, Will was vaguely mortified that he’d behaved like… *like* …

“That was a pretty long call.”

Will sat down heavily, placing a hand over Junior’s head to silence the plaintive cries for Daddy in ever varied tones from under the table. The little boy tried to clamber over his legs. Around the table, Micah and Aaron squirmed in their seats as they nibbled on pita bread from the appetizer plates while Aaron continued his dramatic recount of the squirrel pestering

them; his father didn't like the squirrel, but Aaron thought she was pretty cute – he was quite certain that the squirrel had babies and that's why she was trying to move into their attic…

"Sorry," Will smiled tiredly as he lifted his youngest onto his lap, "It was..."

"Work," the beta finished for him, " *Say* no more."

Kathy Prescott smiled with amusement from behind the menu, her eyes tracking the toddler who quietened down at being back in Daddy's presence, a faint longing in her face - she would have liked to have another child, but it was too late now. Seconds later, the boy twisted until the omega let go, eager to get back to dancing plastic horses across his vacant seat now that his demands for a cuddle had been met.

"You know, I never thought you the type to play hooky."

Will looked up, "Hmm?"

"Not that I didn't enjoy today. You surprised me. I haven't seen you in weeks."

Shrugging, he returned his gaze to the menu, trying not to show his chagrin, "Hannibal said I was working too much."

His husband had practically mandated this, after their talk last Thursday. The alpha would be in DC today and had suggested he take Micah out of school for the day and organise a morning at the museums for their two youngest. Including Kathy had been his idea. Will subtly checked his wristwatch - another thirty minutes until Hannibal arrived.

"Can you believe it's almost Thanksgiving again?" The beta sighed.

Well, they had to get through Halloween first.

Will opened his eyes, called out of sleep by the sound of running water and childish warbling from the en suite. Out of sight, Hannibal grunted as Junior catapulted himself off the counter and into Papa's arms, because the floor was cold and he had no socks on, did he – Papa, the childish voice warbled, the cry sending shivers up Will's spine that urged him to answer, *yes, yes, sweetheart, I'm here*. His husband's deep chuckles rounded the doorway several steps ahead of the alpha and rippled across Will like a brush of comfort, his omega senses tuning into everything about Hannibal and the boy in his arms. Junior saw him first.

"Daddy!" The little boy cried, his hair still in tuffs and eyes freshly scrubbed clean of sleep, struggled out of Papa's arms in a death-defying leap towards Daddy. With a grunt, the alpha changed his grip, trying to hold on, before deciding to give in. The two-year old was dropped unceremoniously into Will's lap, already wrestling for a hug.

All at once his anxieties left him.

“Hey pumpkin,” Will chuckled, kissing the child’s temple as he was blanketed, the filial kiss on the cheek completely missing any part of his face and falling instead on his ear. It’s a little hard to follow the child’s rambles but he nodded along, only really understanding the part about Winston's gross dog breath and cold feet and that there was a birthday party today.

A dry touch brushed back the curls from his forehead, drawing his eyes up.

“Good morning,” Hannibal said quietly over the little boy’s babble.

“Is it?”

The alpha’s mouth twitched in wry humor as Will leaned up for a kiss.

With a wail of protest, Junior grudgingly submitted to being swung up into Papa’s arms.

“There’s a party!” the two-year old cried in frustration at his omega-parent, who obviously didn’t realise the seriousness of the situation, “Daddy!”

“Yes, you are completely right,” Hannibal soothed, nuzzling his young son until the boy giggled and pushed at him with his pudgy fists, “Elizabeta is going to a party, which means that there is no time to waste.”

With a jaunty wink, the older man departed for the long descent to the kitchen, regaling his offspring with lavish descriptions of the upcoming breakfast he would be whipping up in soft languid French, sprinkled with a phrase or two of Italian and something that might be Polish.

Left alone in the bedroom, Will rubbed gingerly at the slight ache in his neck and turned to squint at the mantle clock. Past seven in the morning. The omega sighed and climbed out of bed, the ache of his muscles from last night’s intimacies making themselves known as he shrugged on his robe and shuffled his feet into slippers. With the weather getting chillier, he would have preferred to have lazed about in bed for another hour, but the way their day was arranged made that impossible.

Will mentally ran his finger down the morning checklist; Eli needed a quick shower; Micah and Junior to breakfast *then* dress. After breakfast, Hannibal would tidy up and pack the cars, while his highest duty was to make sure the children were ready to leave before 10AM. The plan was to swing by Evan’s place to collect Tomas, deliver Elizabeta to the birthday party in DC with a detour to pick up little Iris Amsbury along the way, then check-in to drop off their overnight bags at the hotel followed directly by lunch. Depending on how things went, they would either continue on together to Hannibal’s tailor for Tomas’ second fitting, or split up to give the younger boys a break before the Halloween event at the museum.

Will smiled as he cleaned up at the bathroom sink, recalling the startled look on Tomas’ face at the announcement that his good grades last year had earned him a fully-handcrafted formal suit, which would be ready just in time for the holiday season.

Come to think of it, the first party invitation had already arrived in the post last week: the Verger's Christmas Charity Ball. Usually held mid-month December, it had been missing from the Maryland social scene for several years due to some freak accident in the family – by Mrs. Mandeville's reckoning, the scandal involved drugs, satanic rituals and diseased pigs – and then the death of the family patriarch, Molson Verger.

Since Hannibal wasn't one to show up at any event improperly attired, this meant new clothes for everyone, especially Tomas, who'd spend part of his evening entertaining the guests as he'd been drafted to the chamber orchestra put together by the Youth Symphony board for the occasion. According to Mrs. Mandaville the younger, the Vergers were offering a handsome donation to the Youth Symphony in thanks for the generosity.

Micah's already awake and active when Will flung open the curtains, ensconced in his nest of blankets with his hair sticking up in a dozen lopsided braids, the consequences of his sister's experimentation. Sitting on the bed, he ruffled the messy blond locks fondly and picked at one of the neon rubbers; Micah's hair, even after his trim a few weeks ago, remained long enough to be considered a mane.

"Morning sunshine."

"Hi daddy," said Micah brightly, his figurines pausing mid-clash so he could beam at the omega. The battle resumed seconds later over his lap, the entire world forgotten again. Will raised an eyebrow, feeling philosophical about his son's lack of response.

There's some grumbles as the five-year old was peeled away from his cocoon and ushered to the bathroom.

Elizabeta was next.

Despite the drawn curtains and tightly-tucked blankets, the seven-year old was awake and humming under her breath, her flashlight on and a picture book open as she cuddled with her favorite doll within the folds of her blankets.

"Morning sweetpea," Will yawned, reaching for the curtain cord.

With her typical energy, the little girl threw aside her blankets and practically bounced as she flung herself into Will's arms, making him stumble.

"Morning Daddy," she chirped, eyes bright and breath hot.

The omega kissed her soundly on the forehead, and for the countless time in the last few months, filed the moment away to hold back the encroaching panic from managing Crawford and the FBI. "Hmm, you're getting heavy."

Grinning, the little girl pulled up the long sleeve of her pajamas and flexed her slender bicep muscle, regarding the small quivering lump with delight. "That's cos I'm putting on muscle; I'm going to be a ninja, daddy."

“Okay, sweetpea,” Will chuckled under his breath, wrapping his secondborn in her purple robe and nudging her towards the door, “How about a shower?”

Something that once seemed an impossibly complex task – braiding then putting up his daughter’s hair into a bun so it could be tucked neatly under her shower cap – seemed so natural that Will marveled at it.

A smile flickered across his lips as his daughter whined at Micah, who was still loitering at the sink after his face had been washed, to *go away* . The five-year old gave his sister a raspberry before flouncing off, still without pants, to find his slippers. Will sighed and left to fetch a different body wash from Tomas’ bathroom because the usual strawberry one wouldn’t do for today according to his daughter.

“Why are you going to the doctor on Monday?” Elizabeta asked just as they finished sticking the stray wisps of hair into her plastic cap. The question was blunt but not as out of the blue as it might seem; his second child was the one who always wanted to know what her parents up to and had recently developed a bad habit of eavesdropping.

“My yearly check-up.”

Elizabeta’s eyes widened, “Are you having a baby?” She asked with baited breath.

“No,” Will chuckled, spinning the seven-year old back to face the shower stall. “It’s because I was very sick last year.”

“Oh,” Eli said glumly.

His appointments with Doctor Vaughn had fallen to the wayside once he’d been home for over three months without incidents, yet despite all his attempts to get out of it, Hannibal had been very insistent that he attend an annual appointment with the neuropsychologist. Sensing that his daughter’s enthusiasm about her party preparations had dwindled in the face of whatever had caught her imagination, Will stroked his hands over her shoulders, squeezing them.

“What is it, sweetpea?”

Elizabeth frowned, studying his reflection in the mirror. “You’re not going to die, are you?”

Will felt his eyebrows go up. Had they had the death conversation yet? His anxiety, a low-hum behind to and fro of his thoughts, pushed into the stream of his thoughts.

“Of course he will,” came the unexpected answer.

Both omega and daughter turned to face the interloper.

“As will I,” continued Hannibal from the bathroom doorway, Junior in arm. He offered a cup of coffee to his omega and regarded the little girl with a gentle smile, “One day. Fortunately, it’s not in your father’s immediate to-do list, and won’t be for a very long time – now, please get in the shower, young lady, you don’t want to be late, do you?”

"*No*," Eli sighed dramatically, distracted from her troubling line of thought, "Papa, will you do my hair?"

The alpha chuckled, "Of course, *mon chou*, after breakfast though."

Will raised his hands in surrender, grateful that he was getting out of hair duty; "I will do the kitchen," he offered, then added, "I won't break anything, Hannibal, promise."

His husband gave him a dubious smile, secretly mocking him. Will huffed under his breath and squeezed his husband's forearm on the pretence of patting Junior on the bottom, their gazes communicating affection and playfulness and desire. Thoughts of last night bubbled up to the surface, before popping at the sound of something hitting the floor in Micah's room and the requisite cry of surprise. Almost synchronized, alpha and omega each took a deep breath and broke their gaze.

"Hurry up Eli. You heard your papa."

The world's most exasperated seven-year old groaned an affirmative as her parents left and shut the door behind them. A moment later, the shower turned on.

"Twenty-five minutes," Hannibal cocked his head, amused, "An improvement. Soon you'll be almost as fast as me."

Will smiled, because he would probably never be as fast as his husband at herding their unruly brood through their morning ritual, and left to see what all the noise was about; Micah undoubtedly had forgotten about the need to put on his pants after tripping on them - again - and was probably now distracted by his toys.

Breakfast was fresh-cut fruit, buttery croissants with homemade lingonberry jam the color of blood and creme fraiche, with an optional second course of homemade sausage and eggs paired with potato *galette*. The ritual of food as usual managed to calm the children down, too busy filling their mouths with Papa's delicious cooking to wreck mayhem.

"What do you think of skiing?" Hannibal asked out of the blue, scanning the headlines of his Sun subscription on the iPad. While it was generally considered rude by the alpha to do anything other than eat one's meal and converse with one's companions at the dining table, breakfast was the exception.

"Are you asking if I can ski or if I want to ski?" Rain predicted, Will read, tilting his head to read the weather blurb upside down, later tonight and all day tomorrow and Monday.

Hannibal hummed noncommittally and didn't elaborate further. Will put it out of mind, as the alpha was just fishing for information, probably in the middle of ironing out the logistics of winter break.

"Isn't your cousin coming for winter vacation?"

"Chiyoh has a tendency to show up when she's not expected," Hannibal replied cryptically.

Will smiled and then frowned, not entirely sure what to make of the statement. But he forgot about it a moment later when Junior stuck his finger into the butter and realized that it made interesting marks on anything he could get his hands on. Moving the butter dish back to the centre of the table, he wiped the boy's hands and the worst of the smears to the two-year old's disgruntlement.

There's a hundred things to do after breakfast despite the fact they'd already started packing two days prior. They found Junior's backpack underneath Micah's bed and discovered Micah's old Thor toy - now inherited by Hannibal Junior - in the playroom toy box; there's a book about trains and another about dinosaurs that Micah was currently obsessed which were added last minute to the five-year old's backpack; Elizabeta's doll, Rasa, was coming along - they were staying the night in DC and Rasa would be lonely if abandoned to spend the weekend by herself.

Elizabeta was going to the party as Red Riding Hood, with one crucial alteration - a plastic cutlass as her prop instead of a basket of baked goods. None of the other girls, who were all going as Disney princesses, were going to be wearing red and Eli wanted to be special. She also wanted double French braids today, please and thank you Papa.

By the time Will finished dressing Junior and had wrestled Micah into suitable clothes, explaining for the seventeenth time that only Eli needed a costume because their party at the museum didn't start until dinnertime, Hannibal was already showered, dressed and downstairs in the kitchen, calling the kennel to confirm when their dog carer would arrive - Donna was late, again. Behind the alpha on a side counter, stylish child-sized canvas bags with velcro closures and their children's names individually hand-embroidered were laid out already in a row, packed with packets of Hannibal-approved snacks of organic nuts, dried apples, juicy satsumas and bottled water for the day ahead. Junior peered curiously at them from Will's shoulder and reached longingly for his satchel.

Will curled his hand around the little boy's and walked back to peer up the stairs.

"Eli," he called, "Are you coming down? We really have to go."

"I'm not ready," came an outraged cry.

Will resisted the urge to sigh, and set a struggling Junior down. The little boy immediately ran back to the kitchen, probably to press himself to Hannibal's leg or perhaps lick the door into the courtyard where the dogs were probably sitting there staring inside piteously.

"Sweetpea, what have you been doing up there all this time?"

"Getting *ready*."

"Well you should be done. Come on, you don't want to be late, do you?"

The seven-year old appeared at the top of the stairs, a look of indignation on her pretty face as she descended with a flounce, clutching her cutlass between her hands. "I can't find my belt," she cried.

“Where are your boots?”

“I dunno,” she said unhelpfully, and raced back upstairs to look for said belt before he could stop her.

Will did sigh this time and trailed after his youngest to the front foyer. It’s almost no surprise given his husband’s love of orderliness but he still smiled at the sight of their shoes for the morning set out in a row from oldest to youngest. Sitting cross-legged on the porch with just socks, Micah carefully flipped the page on his dinosaur picture book, which he was reading for probably the hundredth time - Will had lost count around thirty-five.

Junior pushed past his Daddy’s legs and stooped to join his brother, wanting to read the book because someone else was doing it rather than any real love of dinosaurs.

“Where’s Elizabeta?” Hannibal asked, laying a possessive hand over his neck.

Will took a deep calming breath and pressed back into the touch.

Tomas was already waiting for them at the gate of Evan’s home when they pulled in, his head bent over his phone with his oldest friend, no doubt absorbed in some game. Unfortunately, Evan’s mother was also waiting for them, coming out as soon as his Volvo pulled into the driveway. Will stayed in the car and smiled weakly as Maria Altagracia de Borbón Larrazábal, aka Mrs. Garmendia, beamed brightly and waved, sending every subliminal signal she could for him to join her.

Will smiled weakly again and pretended that one of the children in the back had called him, turning to avoid her.

“Hannibal,” he said simply.

With a small chuckle, his husband left the car and went to handle the omega.

He exhaled in relief.

Watching the expressions flashing across her face, Will could guess the contents without needing to read her lips - probably something about how shocked she was that Tomas didn’t have plans to attend catechism, how nice it would be if Tomas attended together with Evan, that it was wonderful to see Tomas’ excellent table manners and ah, his grasp of French was *magnifique.*

As a full-time parent, Grace had probably picked Tomas up from school more times in the past year than Hannibal and him combined, and while Will trusted her implicitly with his children, he could never quite get over the awkwardness he felt in her presence. An older omega from an old alpha-omega family, she felt it her moral responsibility to induct him into some sort of secret omega network that got together every Tuesday morning except for the week before and during Christian holidays.

She had already found suitable omega matches for her elder alpha children through her connections, who were now all happily settled - Maria del Santo Evangelio aka Evan, had

been a surprise - and hoped to draw Tomas into her circle; it was never too early to begin the process, she'd wagged her finger at Will last time, she had first met Carlos Garmendia, Evan's Pater, as an twelve-year old in her second cousin's drawing room. It was all good and well that Will had met Hannibal on the street, but why leave things to chance, she'd implored, earnest and not a single flicker of bad intent in her that Will felt bad about how much she made him cringe.

And she always wanted to talk about everything, dragging what should have been a five-minute pick-up or drop off into thirty-minutes of painful chatter standing awkwardly with his car door open and one foot on the gas. Hannibal handled the situation far better, somehow always extracting himself at the exact five-minute mark without offending anyone.

Will took a deep breath when his husband came back to the car, relieved that they were finally back on their way. He smiled and waved again at Altagracia "Grace" Garmendia as Tomas hugged Evan and ran to climb in the back.

"Hey Dad."

"Tomas," he said at the same time that Micah and Junior both belted out "Hi Tomas!"

Hannibal gave their brood a fond look before facing the front to wave at Grace as Will pulled out of the omega's driveway ad haste and headed for the interstate.

"She was enthusiastic this morning."

"Grace wanted to know if we could spare Tomas for a week or two before Christmas. They're spending several weeks in Spain with her family."

Again ? Will almost asked. It seemed that the omega was in Madrid at her parent's mansion in Moraleja or at the holiday home in Mallorca or Bariloche or *somewhere* every few months.

"They're going to Selville, dad, and Granada and Barcelona."

He frowned, "You've been there."

"Yeah when I was like three," grumbled Tomas.

Hannibal smiled out the window, "They thought it would be good for Evan to have a companion and invited Tomas to join them."

What about school, Will thought, what about exams?

"We'll talk about it later." He said, closing the subject as he turned onto the main road.

The rest of the morning's tasks were completed smoothly with no tantrums, lost shoes or sudden attacks of clumsiness. Young Iris Amsbury was collected to much chatter and excitement from Eli at seeing her friend dolled up as Cinderella in a snow cape - the seven-year old omega blushed bright pink at the compliments from the Lecters - and both girls were dropped off at the birthday party on time, more or less. The concierge was waiting for them at

the hotel, and after handing off their bags, they were back in the car to make their lunch reservation at *Isshouan.*

It wasn't until they were preparing to attend Tomas' fitting that tempers flared and stomping tantrums were thrown. Will handed off the toddler to his alpha's capable arms and watched, askance and somewhat envious, as Hannibal expertly calmed the child. The alpha casually strolled to the end of the block and back, humming a concerto as he avoided every pudgy-fisted blow until his namesake had calmed down enough to be rocked to sleep.

His husband, Will had come to realise, always expected things to go awry and was rarely surprised by accidents or obstacles, and in a perverse way, seemed to even relish them.

"Hmm," Hannibal peered at him, hands soft on his face once Junior was snoozing away in the stroller, "Looks like he scratched you..."

Across the room, Micah fell dramatically back on the leather chaise with a soft whomp, before scrambling up to do it again, arms spread like an angel, his dinosaur book abandoned for the moment while he worked off some energy. Will rubbed at his left eye where his youngest had got him and smiled to reassure the alpha. "It's nothing."

"Papa?" came the uncertain call.

The suit was obviously not finished - bits of thread hung from inside the cuffs and the buttons were all plastic, space-holders until the real ones could be added - and yet...

Even as a layman, Will could tell that the charcoal ensemble with an undertone of deep blue would be perfect on Tomas, whose eyes reflected the hidden hues to startling effect.

"We made it to your specifications, Doctor Lecter. Single-breasted two button with double vents for the jacket; jetted pockets, tapered waist - classic, always in style for the young omega," the assistant listed proudly as he followed Tomas into the private showroom, "For the trousers - fitted, quarter break."

Hannibal stood and did a circle around the thirteen-year old before pausing to run clinical hands across his son's shoulders, then slid a finger under the lapel, a slight furrow to his brows. "Perhaps a shawl lapel would be better," he suggested to the assistant, then to Tomas, he assured, "Your father looks lovely in the peaked lapel but I believe they're a bit too sharp for you."

"Dad looks good in everything," his son muttered.

"Very true," His husband laughed. Will felt his skin warm, reading the carnal intent behind the alpha's glance in his direction.

"What do you think, Micah?" Tomas asked.

The five-year old leaned against Papa's leg then circled his brother twice before smiling shyly. "You look pretty, Tomas."

Tomas smiled down at the boy and did another turn in the mirror. He studied the lapels before mentally shrugging and heading back into the change room, pausing to stoop down and hug Micah quickly for his younger brother's compliment.

Hannibal stared after his firstborn, his smile tender.

"Have you applied for leave yet?" The alpha asked as he rejoined Will on the sofa.

The omega inhaled and nodded. Yes, he'd shot off an email request to HR yesterday evening in the bathroom after the alpha had asked him at dinner and he'd lied, saying he'd already filled in the form but forgotten to hand it in. For all his confidence and poise, it was clear that Hannibal wished to leave a good impression on his cousin, Chiyoh. Part of it was the natural alpha instinct to show off but the other side of it… Will thought it felt as though Hannibal wanted to reassure his cousin of something, though what exactly - that he was content, that he had been fine on his own and since made his own family, that he was happy? It wasn't clear. Reaching out, he squeezed the alpha's thigh. It'll be fine, he thought, they had handled his father's visits just fine, and he couldn't imagine that Chiyoh, who was Hannibal's cousin, would be more difficult than that.

Will glanced up at the rear-view mirror as he slowed at the stoplight. In the back, Elizabeta sleepily watched the rain-slicked sidewalk, looking at nothing in particular as she hummed softly along with the music whispering out of her earphones.

The evening at the Smithsonian, a private ticketed Halloween event targeting members with children, had been fun with Alana joining them due to her involvement with a children's charity that partnered regularly with the Foundation. Hannibal spent possibly longer than he should have in front of the medieval armory displays, delighting his audience with gory stories, and the creative finger foods had their children cooing with amazement - until the alpha forbid them from trying the severed finger cheese-and-tomato-sauce breadsticks, on account of the blue and purple food coloring. Since he needed to collect Elizabeta from her party anyway, he'd dropped Alana home.

He was thinking about the next day, that Micah and Junior both needed new shoes, that Elizabeta needed another pair of snow boots and some new scarves wouldn't be amiss either when the call came in. For a moment, he stared at the Caller ID, tempted to decline but then he hesitated.

It was Saturday and late. There were only two reasons for the BAU to call him; someone was dead or someone was about to be.

"Yes?"

"*Will* ," exhaled Jack Crawford in his distinctive burr, "Good. Where are you?"

The obvious relief in the agent's voice paired with the familiar background noises - chatter, cars, rain, the distinctive clicks and whines of high-powered flash photography - sent him into high alert.

"Somewhere near Georgetown," he frowned, "Why? What's going on?"

"What are you doing in Georgetown? You know what - neve rmind. Is Hannibal home with the kids?"

"We're in DC for the weekend. Jack, what's going on?"

"Freddie Lounds just got attacked. By Clark Ingram. Broke in and was waiting for her."

Well, it seemed that Lounds had her story.

Pulling over into parking, he listened distantly as Jack Crawford ran through the details; Lounds had arrived to her current abode - a cheap weekly motel rental - just before 7pm, when she'd been surprised; she'd fought off Ingram but was thrown out the window, her fall broken by the roof of a parked van. The cops had arrived, as had the ambulance, but since she was unconscious, no one at the FBI had been notified until forty minutes ago.

"We found a folder marked BAU that's been emptied. According to Lounds, it held bios on the team *including* consultants - home addresses, next of kin, number plates, which investigations they're read into." Going by the agent's dark tone, his sympathy for Lounds as the victim had ended the moment he found out she was going to live.

Will felt his mouth grow dry at the idea that Ingram knew where he lived, knew what kind of car he drove, knew about Hannibal, the alpha's office, the children. That the beta knew Alana Bloom was responsible for the renewed interest in the murders attributed to Peter, that Will was to blame for the FBI knocking on his door… Someone said something in the background, and muffled, Crawford barked a question back at her.

"Not answering her cell either," he managed to catch.

Will's frown deepened, "Who's not answering?"

There was a beat before Crawford replied.

"We've accounted for everyone except Alana Bloom."

"Alana?" He repeated, confused. "I was just with her. She was at the Smithsonian with us, I just dropped her home."

He was about twenty blocks and five turns away from her house, a renovated homestead off the main street set almost inside the small nature preserve flanking the area and away from the other residences. If something happened, her neighbors wouldn't hear it…

"Daddy?"

Turning to his daughter, who had somehow taken off her seat belt in his distraction and was now leaning into the front, hand tugging at his shoulder, Will put his finger to his mouth for quiet.

“We called her home first, and then tried her cell,” Crawford told him tersely. Will could understand the man’s agitation - Ingram disdained Alana Bloom, she *offended* him and even worse, she had been and possibly still was his ‘type’.

“I’m close. I can turn around, check on her.”

Alana Bloom was owed that much.

“No, no, Will, you head back to the hotel; Nasser’s on it.”

He took a deep breath, trying to curb his annoyance at Crawford’s stubbornness - he was only a few goddamn minutes away, and it wasn’t like he hadn’t been trained to clear a room. He’d been a beat cop in New Orleans before making homicide, he knew what he was doing.

“Nasser’s thirty-minutes away, at least - it’s past 9pm, it’s raining and it’s the Saturday before Halloween, Jack,” snapped Will, already pulling out to do a U-turn. “I’m closer, you know I’m closer.”

Hearing that intake of breath just before Crawford launched into an argument, the omega ended the call and smoothly changed lanes to pass a car playing loud rock music, driving as fast as he could within the law. Anger came over him. Anger towards Crawford and the FBI. If the Bureau hadn’t been so conscious of their precious reputation that they’d pressed, rushed and ignored; if Lounds hadn’t tried her best to defame the BAU for money, for notoriety, for her own ego; if the investigation into Sarah Craber had been done properly, if Crawford had done his goddamn job...

“Daddy?”

The quiet query broke through his tirade, startling him.

“Put on your belt, sweetheart.”

The seven-year old scrambled to comply, tangling and then untangling herself from her earphone cords in the process.

“Where are we going? Aren’t we going back to the Jefferson?” She asked, doubtfully eyeing the rain-streaked scenery flying past.

Sparing a glance, Will tried to smile reassuringly. “I forgot to ask Aunt Alana about something, so we’re just going back for a few minutes, okay, sweetheart?”

His little girl nodded dubiously, perplexed why Daddy didn’t just ring or text instead. If she knew he was lying, Eli didn’t call him out on it.

Outside, the rain flickered down, mean and merciless fat droplets that clicked against his windscreen like pebbles. Time seemed to stretch out as he stopped at the lights, paused at the

stop signs, then finally he was turning into the cul de sac Alana Bloom's driveway opened onto. Old stakeout instincts came back to him, prompting him to switch off the headlights as he turned into the recycled flagstone pathway and parked just behind the large oak tree hiding the house from casual observation.

Eli was out of her belt a second after he turned off the engine, her little face showing her continued consternation with her father's inexplicable actions.

"Daddy," she said, leaning into the front, "We're going to get wet."

Why were we so far away, she didn't ask, trying to save some of her father's dignity.

Because.

Because I would let Alana Bloom die if I had to chose between you and her, so Ingram can't see you, can't hear you, can't even know you're anywhere *near here*, Will didn't say back. Though Clark Ingram wouldn't understand an omega's bond to their children, he would know how to exploit it; he would have no qualms about going after a child.

Will twisted around and placed his hand over her shoulder, "Eli, do you think think you could go to the Mitchell's house and wait for me there? I'm just going to check on Aunt Alana, okay?"

With a pout she fought valiantly to hide, Eli nodded unhappily, her consternation transforming into suspicion.

"Don't forget your poncho," he smiled, pulling her in to kiss her on the eyebrow, pretending that everything was okay and hoping desperately that unlike with Tomas, his acting would actually pass muster.

With a beleaguered sigh, the seven-year old pulled her rain poncho out and unfolded it, shimmying it back over her head. Will watched her get out and smiled encouragingly as she glanced at him before running back down the driveway towards where the street was. Will watched, eyes burning hot, until her slight figure disappeared leftward into the Mitchell's vegetable garden.

Turning up the collar of his coat, the omega got out.

Peering through the rain, Will approached the house cautiously. The porch light was still lit. He frowned. Had Alana forgotten to switch it off? Keeping to the cover of the trees which thinned out the rain, he worked his way around to the back of the house. The only illumination inside was a hallway light.

Suddenly, the light in the kitchen switched on, its brightness bleeding outwards. For a fraction of a second, it illuminated the rain.

Dressed in a worn Johns Hopkins t-shirt and a bright violet house coat, Alana Bloom, alive and hale, padded into the generous kitchen and put the kettle on, face scrubbed clean of cosmetics and her hair twisted into a sloppy bun.

Will exhaled, relieved. Mentally, he replayed the likely course of events; handbag hung up, keys in the dish, kicking off the heels at the front door before going upstairs in the dark, handbag dangling from one finger, palm trailing the familiar wooden-panelling of the walls; a quick shower and turn in front of the sink mirror; changing back into the pajamas she'd left on the hamper this morning before retracing her steps downstairs for a cup of tea; *"Chamomile and mint," Alana smiled, "You should try it sometimes."*

The FBI had probably tried Alana's house line before she'd arrived home, then again while she had been in the shower. As for her cell phone, it was probably still upstairs in her handbag.

Slipping out his cell and dialling Jack Crawford's private number, Will left the temporary cover of the trees and headed for the back porch, when he caught a movement in his peripheral.

Clark Ingram, his face ugly with intent, closed in from behind.

" *Alana* !"

In his ear, Crawford picked up the call and demanded to know where he was.

Like it's all happening underwater and in slow-motion, Alana Bloom jerked up from her perusal of her mail to frown at her rain smeared window, her eyes straining to see who or what had made that sound. Her face shifted from confusion into shock then terror as she caught her reflection.

No.

"Will," Crawford's voice screeched from the tiny phone speakers, "*Will* , what the *hell* is going on!"

Spinning on her heels, Alana flung her mug at the intruder. It's the last thing Will saw before the kitchen plunged into darkness.

Flying up the porch steps, Will ripped the hanging fern right out by the hook in his desperate panic to reach the extra key hidden in the pot. The ceramic shattered instantly, but the sound hardly registered in the cacophony of rain and shrieking floorboards. A muffled scream and the bangs of bodies hitting plaster and wood echoed out from beyond the back door.

His hands shook with adrenaline as he jerked the key in the deadlock and flung the door open, doorknob cracking against the wall. The roar of the rain poured inside and clashed with the crack of a gun.

Will jerked. A shout was the only warning before both betas tumbled down the stairs, half crawling, half falling, as they each tried to beat the other to the gun. Alana's head hit the floor with a smack that shook through the floorboards.

The omega froze.

A thunderous silence fell as the monster turned to face him, panting.

Surprise quickly turned into recognition and animosity.

Will stared coolly back. In the distant reaches of his psyche, Peter Bernadone recoiled from the predator that glowered from Ingram's furious features, but his monster, the calculating creature that slunk coiled around his thought streams, waded out from the deep.

His gaze flicked to the revolver clutched in the beta's grasp.

He recognised it - Smith & Wesson, Model 26, .38 special - a congratulations gift from Hannibal but picked out by Will several years ago when Alana had first started doing consults for the BAU.

The events thundered through his mind's eye; Ingram parking in another street, keeping to the shadows of the trees; breaking in through the laundry - *the Strangler liked going through there, the window latch was always broken* ; watching her arrive through the frosted glass of the front door; skulking in the darkness, watching her unguarded moments - *no one said he couldn't enjoy himself* - waiting for her to come back from her shower, fresh and clean and unsuspecting; waiting, waiting for the right moment; Alana looking up into the looming outline of a nightmare; her shock transforming into terror; flinging the only thing in her hand at him; killing the light - this was her house, *her house* , no one knew it better; the fight for the gun; one foot slipping, one hand reaching out to grab something, *anything* ; the stairs.

On the floor, Alana stirred, letting out a pained groan.

Never taking his eyes off the omega, Ingram fisted her hair, slamming Alana against the floor, the movement familiar fast and brutal. Phantom pain pierced Will's skull, as Sarah Craber and all the other girls like her, the violence of their dying moments colliding into him and making him breathless and weak.

Alana stopped moving.

No. No. No.

Calm, Ingram straightened, his shadow stretching and twisting.

The silence inside the house, beyond the threshold of the door frame, seemed deafening.

He's going to kill you , his shadow noted, studying the beta clinically from behind Will's shaken gaze; *he's going to enjoy it too - he's never had an omega, never thought about hurting one of you, such a great taboo…*

Will took a deep breath, and then another, letting the possibilities germinate in his mind. Each decision, each reaction. In the deep wells of his imagination, he felt it - the thready heart beats of all the women that Ingram had ever come after, their fears, their regrets, their overwhelming desperation. Suddenly, the image of Eli came to mind, breaking his concentration. He forcibly pushed the image away. This fight could go only two ways. Will wanted it to be his way. And he couldn't be distracted, couldn't *feel* .

Behind him, long forgotten among the broken remains of the hanging fern, his abandoned phone hissed impotently for attention, Crawford's bellowing voice reduced to an insect-like buzz.

Clark Ingram took a step towards him.

He took a step back.

Kill him, his shadow hissed, *it's self-defence, no one would even look twice.*

But Crawford knew he was here, which by extension meant that Moses knew - and Freddie Lounds was involved which meant the whole damn FBI probably knew by now, PR and Legal swarming all over the situation in anticipation of Miss Lounds' 50K exclusive tell-all interview and Hannibal's displeasure being translated into expensive lawyers besieging Quantico. He hadn't planned for this, hadn't calculated the variables, hadn't woven a story.

He mentally calculated the time that local HRT would take to get here; ten minutes by air or thirty if they go by road; in this weather though...

Not soon enough.

On the floor, Alana made a soft pained noise.

For an instant, Will glanced down.

One second.

But that's all it took.

With a murderous scowl, Ingram whipped up the gun.

Adrenalin hit his body like a blast of hot air, omega-reflexes spinning him around and sending him huddling for cover before he'd even registered his thigh and calf muscles tensing to run. He slammed the door behind him just as the shot went off, shattering the frosted glass. Will squeezed his eyes shut and half-ran half-crawled, barely noticing as the shards scratched at him. He tumbled onto the sodden grass, breath catching at the chill of rain soaking into his pants.

Halfway clear to the trees, another shot went off, the sound sending a bolt of fear through him and making him falter. *Daddy* , he thought he heard in the din but he shoved it out of mind. The crack was instantly swallowed by the roar of the rain.

Without needing to think about it, he headed deeper into the wooded preserve and away from the houses.

Protect Eli, his brain chanted, *protect Eli, protect Eli...*

Three , his spectre counted as he weaved through the foliage at a dead run, not looking back, knowing instinctively with the preternatural awareness of omegas that he was being *hunted*.

He didn't think about Eli, waiting for him. Didn't think about her staring longingly out the window of the Mitchell's sunroom. Didn't think about her frown getting deeper the longer Daddy didn't come back. Didn't think about Hannibal rushing to her, holding her tight, asking where Will was. Tomas, Micah and Junior asleep and unaware what was unfolding across town. The pain, shocking and wringing all the breath from his lungs, punched him right in the chest. *No.* He let his shadow take over him, let his survival instincts drive him to dodge right and veer left. If he dared to give in the worry, he would be paralysed. He could do this, he could banish her - him - *them* from his mind.

A fourth shot went off, the sound piercing through the storm.

One round left. Wait for it.

Falling into a crouch by the sheltering arms of an old oak twisted onto its side by it's own immense mass, Will wiped at his eyes and tried to confirm his bearings. Clark Ingram, chasing unfamiliar prey in unfamiliar territory, crashed past and disappeared into the understory. The beta appeared a few seconds later, his gaze glowing with rapaciousness.

Ingram growled in frustration, brandishing his gun left and right.

Slowly, Will inched backwards to keep the tree trunk between them. The beta stalked forward, doing nothing to hide his footsteps. Stupid. *No* , his shadow corrected, *overconfident. Look at how he's holding that. He probably thinks he's got two more rounds left, probably doesn't realise this is a five-round piece.*

Which frankly was the same as stupid.

Patting at the ground, raking his fingers through mulch and wet leaves, Will searched for a rock, a large stick, anything he could throw. He'd distract the beta. Yes, get him to waste that final round. And then he could try something.

"Daddy!"

Will whipped around at the familiar wail, shocked.

Blinking away the rain in her eyes, the seven-year old peered into the darkness of the trees, unaware that two monsters were fighting inside. Her damp red riding cloak, silhouetted by the floodlights from the back porch, stood out like a beacon. Out of the corner of his eye, Ingram's back straightened, the gun swerving to point in the direction of the unwanted witness.

NO.

In a burst of desperation, Will rushed out from his hiding spot. There was no planning. He didn't even have time to think. Terror and love gripped him, making his vision blur. He slammed into the beta with his full body weight. The gun went off as they slammed into a tree, the sound loud as thunder.

Will felt his heart explode as he thought he heard another plaintive shout of *Daddy* . He didn't look. Wouldn't look. And then he couldn't because Ingram was grappling at him, rough hands grasping at stiff wet clothing. Will's head snapped back as he was punched in the face, the blow glancing off his cheek. He stumbled, unprepared, and tumbled onto the wet ground with a smack. This was followed a kick in the side, and then another, hands finding the scruff of his hair and using it to slam his head against the nearest trunk.

Pain burst in his skull, the blow rattling him, making it hard to concentrate.

" *Daddy* ," he thought he heard over the cocoon of pain.

Eli , his mind chanted, *Eli,* as if it had forgotten all other names. Will's leg shot out, slamming hard into Clark Ingram's ankle. The beta screamed and went down, clutching at his twisted appendage. Will scrabbled at the ground, trying to get up, to escape. Ingram snapped up, shooting him a venomous snarl.

Will flinched as the gun swung to bear on him.

" *You* ," Ingram growled, then pulled the trigger.

Will exhaled.

The beta's smugness morphed into confusion at the abortive click of the gun.

Fisting his right hand, the omega pulled back and swung. Pain ruptured from his knuckles and coursed down his wrist but he ignored it. Spinning on his heels, he headed back towards Alana's house.

"Eli!" He yelled, blinking against the bruising he could feel beginning to swell on his face. Leaning against tree trunks along the way, he faltered as the injuries caught up with him. Gritting his teeth, Will forced himself to focus on the porch lights that his daughter had turned on. " *Eli!* "

No one answered him. A wave of despair crashed into him, the sensation almost overwhelming him completely with its sense of failure and self-loathing. Will shivered as rainwater trickled past his collar and soaked its way down his back.

"Eli," he rasped, feeling the pained ribs, the bruises, the pulled muscles, the oncoming concussion. "Eli, sweetpea..."

From behind the tree overshadowing Alana Bloom's overgrown vegetable patch, a small slight figure appeared, uncertain, silhouetted by the porch lights. Will blinked at the sight, his eyes hot with tears of relief. "Eli," he breathed.

A snarl was his only warning before Ingram was upon him, the beta tackling him to the ground. Will twisted around, knees and elbows coming up to ward off the blows. Hands gripped his throat and squeezed.The beta was shouting at him, but he couldn't hear him. All he heard was Eli screaming for *Daddy* , *Daddy* . His fingers scoured into the beta's arm, trying desperately to keep his airways open.

Eli was watching. Eli was watching him. *And he couldn't let her watch Clark Ingram murder him.*

His feet braced against the ground, Will bucked.

Sent off balance, Ingram's hands slipped. But then the beta was upon him again, forearm jammed under Will's chin and crushing his trachea. The omega choked, hips twisting to get traction for a flip. Distracted, he didn't see Eli until the last moment.

"Eli, no!" He croaked, hand flung out to stop the girl.

The rock slammed into the back of Ingram's head with a solid thunk.

The beta blinked, head rattled from the blow and turned on his attacker, his hand grabbing at the soaked gingham dress. Eli gave a shocked yelp as the beta smacked her hard across the face, the blow jerking the child's head back so forcefully that Will's heart stopped. Crumpled on the ground, Eli whimpered, clutching at her cheek. Anguish drove Will upright and into Ingram, crashing them back into the muddy ground, because how dare he, how dare he! *Don't touch her, don't touch her* , he yelled, the words coming out as nothing but gulps for air.

At the corner of his eye, Eli got up. *Get out of here* , he wanted to yell, angry that she'd disobeyed him, terrified that she was here at all, that the only thing standing between her and Ingram was him. She should have been back at the Mitchell's, who would have called Alana first, and then Hannibal when the beta didn't pick up...

Hannibal who was back at the hotel, unaware of what was going on.

Crashing into Ingram's back with a shriek, Eli struck again, bringing the stone down on the Alexandria Strangler's skull. There was no fear in her eyes, only fury, the uncontrollable unreasonable eruption of an alpha in the midst of her own personal maelstrom. Ingram turned to swat her away but lesson learned, Eli swerved out of the way. The next blow slammed into the beta's temple and bowled him clear sideways. Ingram hit the muddy ground with a smack.

Quiet fell.

The sound of rain rushed in to fill the void.

Slowly, Elizabeta lowered the rock, breathing hard.

Chapter End Notes

So, cliffhanger. I know. It's a two-parter!
To everyone who left comments and kudos thank you thank you - I'm doing brushing therapy right now and I don't like the side effects.
I'm sorry if you left a comment and were expecting a reply and I didn't comment back -

I've been lax in that area and my anxiety means my online activity is limited. I go entire days sometimes with my phone on airplane mode, though I'm just at home and nowhere near a plane.
Thank you so much to Kyuu who recently watched 'Yuri on Ice' with me - hon, I'm sorry that USA politics is getting you down right now and I hope this cheers you up.
My gratitude as always to eclectic who provided much needed conversation and reality checks as I plotted out the next arc and wrote this part and the next.

Bajativo

Chapter Summary

Aftermath. Dinner and a talk at midnight. A visitor. Somewhere in the woods...

Chapter Notes

It's been so long I'm sure everyone and their grandma thought I was dead. Unbetad, but a lot of the conversations are due to amazing exchanges between me and eclectic playing conversational tag online. And I'm gonna correct this over the next few days so don't be like - huh if the grammar changes. I'm posting this in the middle of the night and it's all a bit muddled.
Thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter all those months ago and recently.
Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack Crawford was out before the parking brake was on, and without preamble, brushed past the uniforms still taping off the area to make a beeline for Alana Bloom's house. Agent Nasser lengthened his strides to greet the agent, keeping pace as he gave his report. The older alpha nodded tightly but didn't stop. Their eyes met for a brief moment across the chaos of bodies. Crawford gave him an intense look then glanced to the side at Hannibal, his expression flickering to closed and cautious.

The omega looked away, holding his breath as the pressure assaulted him - contained panic, guilt, unrepentant vindictive fury, fear. When he glanced up, Crawford had been replaced by a uniformed officer, speaking to Agent Nasser and gesticulating urgently. When the agent appeared a minute later on the wide front porch of Alana Bloom's house, he looked exhausted. Right behind him came Alana Bloom's unconscious form, strapped into a stretcher. The paramedics bore the injured beta down the long stretch of uneven driveway and loaded her into the ambulance, the alpha keeping pace.

Climbing aboard, Crawford shut the ambulance doors.

The vehicle pulled away, sirens on.

Will closed his eyes, his head swimming as he took a long relieved breath, the sound swallowed by the steady trickle of rain. An indeterminate amount of time passed as he drifted in and out of consciousness, wavering in place as his side was taped and his knuckles iced.

The head wound had bled a lot but was just superficial, all scraped skin and pulled hair. Will hissed at the sensation of the antiseptic but it's a good distraction. He wanted to avoid thoughts of the night, wanted to focus on other things, not think anything at all.

Will gripped the icepack braced against his ribs, trying to force away the sudden tremor that coursed through him, the sizzle of shock from the remembered crack of the gun.

Protect Eli...

Police had cordoned off both ends of the block, even though technically Alana's house wasn't anywhere on it - blocking the cul de sac would have been just as effective but he supposed that it was probably not dramatic enough for the FBI, who tended to enjoy their spectacles despite all the claims to the contrary. Squad cars, CSI, and ominous government SUVs were scattered along the street, double-parked and sometimes triple-parked, more coming than going. Every once in awhile another vehicle would arrive, bearing another load of stern-faced agents in light tactical gear, armed with flashlights and FBI-issue raincoats.

The only ones yet to arrive were the BAU, still on the road from north-west Maryland.

Shoes caked with mud and wet leaves, clothes rumpled and dirty, Will sat uncomfortably on the bumper of the ambulance charged with his care, pressed shoulder to hip with Hannibal who cradled Eli in his arms. Her little head was buried in her Papa's side, muddy boots bracketed by much larger adult feet encased in even muddier loafers. From time to time, Hannibal would turn to check on him, but mostly he just sat there gently stroking a hand over their daughter's head.

One of the paramedics returned, asking to double-check the tape applied to his ribs. Once again, she tried to convince him to go to a hospital, unhappy with his flat-out refusal to go in for scans and overnight observation. Feeling as though he were underwater, Will shook his head and stood up, shock blanket slipping from his shoulders. Hannibal's hand found his and squeezed tightly, to comfort and to caution. Will tried to smile back at the alpha, because yes, they were in accord, but found his face frozen in expressionlessness.

The nearest houses, all five of them, were fully lit. Someone's dog was barking. Shuffling about with dazed looks on their faces and hot drinks in hand, they watched the show muttering to one another from their wide windows. From the second floor, little faces that were supposed to be asleep peered out from behind curtains, drawn by the sirens. They'd all been interviewed by now, not that any of them heard or saw anything; the elderly couple had already been in bed, as had the families with young children; one teenager had been on her headphones playing a videogame, her parents out late with friends while the other had friends over for a Halloween sleepover; the young couple in No. 1125 had been watching a horror movie.

No one could add to or corroborate Will Graham-Lecter's statement, except for his seven-year old daughter, who was in shock and unsurprisingly traumatised, and Doctor Bloom, who was too concussed to speak.

Hannibal stood with a grunt and peered at the sky; the rain was starting to pick up again.

“Shall we move to the car?” His alpha asked, already bending to pick up Eli.

Yes. Yes they should. The sooner they left the better.

Under the menacing clouds which somehow yet wrung more rain from their folds, lab assistants labored, their hair pasted to their skulls and rivulets of chilled rain down their backs as they held umbrellas over local CSI who squinted down at the mud with their flashlights, trying to find something, *anything* that could be used to figure out where the perp had escaped to. He watched them going through the paces, knowing what to do and where to look, even if they weren’t certain if they’d find anything; the rain was drowning everything tonight, not just gutters.

Agent Nasser had an umbrella but it was already too late, his suit soaked from just the five-minutes he’d spent in open rain. Will closed his eyes momentarily. When he opened them, Nasser was already gone, his retreating back a blurry dark shape as he hurried over to a SUV pulling in, taking up it seemed the last bit of pavement left in the street.

Ed Moses got out, followed by the usual suspects.

He must have been dozed off for longer than he thought; it was a long drive from North Maryland.

The omega licked his dry lips, suddenly uncertain.

He trusted his ability to marshall himself into being the kind of witness that the BAU would expect of him, but right now, he wasn’t even sure he was getting enough air. He could see and hear everything, but almost as if his brain was suffering some kind of error, nothing seemed to quite make sense. It’s from the concussion, the paramedics told him - from when your head was thrown against a tree, his shadow reminded him - but it didn’t feel like it was just a concussion. Hannibal’s hand snaked up his back and pressed into the base of his neck, a poor substitute for what he needed.

From a long way off, the sound of familiar voices pierced through his haze.

The driver side door clicked open, soundwaves pouring in eagerly to fill the void.

Will gazed after Hannibal.

Edward Moses had his hands on his hips, an uncharacteristically weary look upon his features as he surveyed the scene. Catching his gaze, the beta inclined his head in acknowledgement but walked on around the car.

“Doctor Lecter,” he greeted, then shifting to look over the alpha’s shoulder to the passenger side, “Will.”

He straightened, the frayed ends of his nerves aching as he braced himself to give his statement yet again.

Twice he’d been interviewed. Informally by Agent Nasser, then once the full armada of Emergency Services had arrived, by a DC office agent named Tanner, Jon - short for

Jonathan. Sorry for the inconvenience, Mister Graham, but we have a couple more questions, Tanner had said, striving for a casual demeanor despite his suspicious gaze and meaningless smile. Will hadn't liked how the man had looked at him, and even more hadn't liked the way that he had regarded Hannibal when the alpha had intervened fifteen minutes in, sensing that Will's exhaustion was about to become translated into blistering sarcasm.

Eli had only been interviewed once, accompanied by Hannibal who ended the interview at exactly ten minutes. It had been allowed. Or rather Agent Tanner hadn't been given a chance to disagree.

Will hadn't been allowed to stay with her. No, Tanner had insisted, omega and child were to be kept separate; if they were interviewed together about the night's events, Elizabeta might unintentionally conform to her father's memories, resulting in the loss of an important detail in her testimony. We want to make sure we get a complete picture of the evening's events, didn't we?

He exhaled at the memory of Tanner's patronizing tone of voice.

Ed Moses' assessing gaze swept from the alpha to him then back again, trying to figure out how thin the ice was. His answer was received when Hannibal shut the car door, closing the possibility of speaking with him.

He watched his husband draw the beta away to talk out of earshot.

Sullenness fell over him at Hannibal's actions though another part of him, the reasonable part, was relieved that he wouldn't have to listen to what Moses had to say, even humbled that his husband had silently gone from anger to forgiveness. It wasn't over, no, but not tonight. Tomorrow - or rather later today; midnight had come and gone awhile ago. The BAU would want them to come in for an official statement, as soon as possible. Will closed his eyes, exhausted at the thought of heading into Quantico on a Sunday; they had plans; new clothing and shoes for the children, lunch reservations, an afternoon at the botanical gardens, then back in Baltimore early to have dinner at home so Tomas could revise his book report and be in bed on time.

The car door clicked open, letting in another surge of noise and damp. Will turned to look at his husband, a question on his lips. Instead of saying anything, Hannibal curled one hand over his nape and drew him into a kiss, the gesture outwardly affectionate, something to comfort, but secretly imbrued with meaning.

"Feeling better?"

Will licked his dry lips, his gaze focused on the flickers of torchlight through the trees, reminded uncomfortably of something he was trying desperately to banish from thought. Hel nodded faintly, not sure if he was lying, not sure if he was upset, guilt and apprehension and self-loathing curled like a noose around his neck. His headache remained, a constant background throbbing.

It was beneath his husband to start an argument in public - no, the alpha had been the model gentleman, the ideal husband, gentle and considerate and forgiving. He would save the

chastisement for the privacy of their bedroom, out of consideration for Will's reputation, and mindful of the example that they gave to their children; they had a respectful and loving marriage, and there would be no shouting and emotional tirades in this house.

Will hated it.

He wanted Hannibal to be angry, to shout at him, to accuse him of being thoughtless, to punish him. He should have guessed that Eli, their willful protective alpha daughter, would ignore his attempt to keep her safe and trail after him. He should have known. He could have gone with her, seen her to the door. He should have said hello to the Mitchell's, asked them to watch Eli, told them to call 911 if they didn't hear from him in five minutes, asked a neighbor to come with him…

Will swallowed painfully and cautiously reached for his bruised neck.

He could've done it differently.

In the entombed hush of the car, punctuated only with the soft rhythmic breathing of their daughter, nothing was said as they waited for a path to be cleared for them. Hannibal started the engine and gestured in thanks to Agent Gracen. A dull pressure tugged at Will's eyelids as they passed the law enforcement barricades and turned the corner but he fought against it.

At a red light, Hannibal reached over to tap at the multimedia screen, the movement familiar - every time they had a drive longer than ten minutes, his husband liked to listen to music. Tchaikovsky began to flow from the speakers, a piece of music he vaguely recognized as something from the Nutcracker. The light bucolic refrain, horns and strings weaving together with the harp, seemed to raise the other man's spirits but did nothing for Will's disquiet, which lingered as the music switched to something from Mendelssohn.

The rain began again, a light mist that intensified into a steady downpour by the time they arrived at the hotel. The doorman hurried out to greet them, his oversized purple umbrella bobbing in the lamplight. Behind him came a bellhop with an extra umbrella.

Will fumbled with his belt, the exhaustion of the evening swallowing his limbs like quicksand. Somehow he struggled out of the car as Hannibal woke Eli for the thirty seconds needed to transfer her from the backseat into his arms. In a fugue state, the omega followed his husband through the deserted hotel reception, head down, too tired to be awkward about his ill-fitting borrowed clothes, his muddy shoes, the bandages over his knuckles.

Upstairs, Will helped Eli prepare for bed while Hannibal spoke to the emergency minder arranged by the hotel and saw the woman out. Through the gap in the bathroom door, he heard them, Hannibal's distinct rumble, her deep melodious voice, an elder woman's voice, already so charmed by his husband that she was chuckling with him like old friends.

"Daddy?" Eli opened her mouth to continue but her words were swallowed by a yawn.

"Hmm?"

"Can I sleep with Tomas tonight?"

The guilt, buried beneath his numbness, resurfaced with a vengeance. Taking a deep breath, Will enfolded her back into his arms and nodded, “Of course you can.”

Tomas was still up. Will’s surprised to see the light coming out from the attached hotel room but perhaps he shouldn’t be. It was supposed to be a trip that took thirty minutes, maybe forty with the rain; pick up Eli, drop off Alana, come back. That had been four hours ago. Tomas would have noticed the discrepancy, and worried about it, his imagination going into overdrive. Will knew that he would have.

“Dad,” said the thirteen year old, his face tentatively relieved in the dim glow of his tablet.

“Tomas.”

Eli rushed from Daddy’s side to her brother, who sat up just in time to catch her tackle. The boy stared at him over his sister’s shoulder as the seven year old burrowed her face into his armpit and stayed there, inhaling in his scent like they’d been apart for weeks, not hours.

“Eli’s going to sleep here tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” Tomas replied without hesitation, his uncertainty switching instantly to solicitousness as he read the paleness of his father’s face, the burgeoning bruise to the omega’s jaw, the exhaustion stretched tight across Will’s brows, the ill-fitting FBI pullover under the wrecked overcoat. The boy flipped a corner of his covers, ushering Eli to get in.

Will swallowed at the thick lump in his throat as he watched them, Eli snuggling to Tomas’ side, blanket pulled up until she’s almost disappeared. Tomas ran a hand over her hair, soothing. His son frowned up at him, his anxiety accusing as Will stooped down to kiss Eli and him on the forehead.

“Tell you about it tomorrow,” he murmured against Tomas’ hair, before pulling back, “You shouldn’t be up so late. Get some sleep.”
Staring at his two eldest children and capturing the scene for posterity, Will left reluctantly. Closing the door to the attached mini-suite, he lingered, listening.

If the children were talking, they were whispering because he couldn’t hear anything. His hand reached for the door handle, his parental suspicions urging him to double-check that they were sleeping; that Tomas wasn’t hearing anything he wasn't supposed to from Elizabeta. Will’s hand dropped away as he caught the distant sound of the babysitter bidding Hannibal a final goodnight and the suite’s double-doors being locked.

Will wavered, then finally left to check on the younger boys.

Tomas was sensible. He would probably take whatever his sister said with a grain of salt, perhaps even comfort her by taking her observations and trying to rationalize, make the events less terrifying than it had actually been. Yes. Tomas would look after her. Hannibal and he had both spoken to Elizabeta already, done the best they could considering how wrung out all of them were, now they just needed time.

Time.

In the other bedroom, Micah and Junior slept on soundly in their respective bed and cot, the nightlight casting silent leaping lambs upon the walls.

On autopilot, Will let Hannibal lead him to the bathroom. The alpha helped him out of his coat, and left him to undress as he started the shower. The warmth of the water put sensation back into his limbs, but drain what little energy he had left, until he's lightheaded, held upright only by his slick fingers grasping at the tiles. The hot water burned a trail over his face, running in rivulets along the swollen curve of his cheek and eyebrow, around the stiff tape of his heaving ribs. Self-conscious of the evidence littering his body, Will shifted uneasily as his husband pressed close to wrap around him, a physical blanket of alpha skin, muscle and bone. Had it only been four hours ago when he was grappling with Clark Ingram in the mud?

"You're safe with me, Will," his husband murmured.

Was he?

The omega screwed up his eyes as something broke inside his ribcage with a wet snap.

Her damp red riding cloak, silhouetted by the floodlights from the back porch, stood out like a beacon. Out of the corner of his eye, Ingram's back straightened, the gun swerving to point in the direction of the unwanted witness. There's a crack before he could open his mouth.

Sucking in a sharp breath, the first sob came out as a cry of pain. The next one came as a shudder of panic and then he couldn't stop.

Eli gave a shocked yelp as the beta smacked her hard across the face, the blow jerking the child's head back.

Numbness gave way to hysteria as his knees buckled and he sagged back into his alpha's hold, unable to get a breath in, unable to cry out as everything hit him all at once, wracking his body with heaves of toxic loathing, each shudder more excruciating than the last. Will pushed Hannibal away and fell to his knees, gagging as he emptied his stomach onto the tiles.

Hannibal murmured something foreign and lyrical as fingers sank into his nape to direct him into the spray. Will closed his eyes and drifted in and out of awareness as those elegant fingers that he'd seen dancing over the harpsichord keys released the knots of clotted blood, mud and twigs tangled up in his hair. They traced the livid bruises along his sides and curled over his stiff elbows, one and then the other as Hannibal washed him, paying careful attention to the cuts and nicks along his forearms, the dirt under his fingernails, his tender throat. It seemed to take forever for his muscles to unlock, for sense to return so that he could stand, to *feel* clean, and when it's over, he's been hollowed.

Leaving him with a long sleeping shirt and a robe to change into, Hannibal collected their soiled clothing and shoes which joined Elizabeta's in a large paper bag, everything except jewellery and their watches, and disappeared to dispose of it.

It took longer than he expected to dress, even with the loose fit of the flimsy cotton shirt. When Will finally made his way to the living area, too wired in his exhaustion to even think

about pretending to sleep, Hannibal already had the fire going in the grate and was on the phone.

“Yes, I’d like the soup as a main,” the alpha was saying, “That would be lovely, my husband isn’t feeling very well.”

No. He wasn’t feeling well.

Yet despite the cold sickly feeling in his gut, he felt his mouth wet at the notion of food, his stomach shuddering in hunger, eager to be filled with something other than violence and confusion.

Sitting heavily on the sofa, Will squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the headache that had been cresting and dipping finally hit a plateau. The piano music playing in the background, something quiet and vaguely Chopin, soothed a bit of the roughness, but did nothing for the images swirling behind his eyes, some real, some imagined.

“You look like you could use a drink,” Hannibal said from behind, his tone as light as if this were any other night. If he was pretending to make the omega feel better, he was doing a superb job.

Looking well except for the gauntness around his eyes from the late hour, the alpha gave him an encouraging smile.

“If you’re offering.”

There’s the familiar ding of crystal being take out from the glass cabinet, something being poured, then the alpha was beside him, offering him a glass of wine.

Will eyed the red liquid dubiously. Was he allowed to drink? If so he preferred whisky.

“You know that’s going down in one swallow.”

Actually, the amount in the glass was barely a swallow.

Hannibal’s eyes creased in gentle amusement, evidently able to read his omega’s mind. “I know. Which is why your second drink will be tea, and a course of pain relief medication.”

Taking the wine, Will hid a sigh as he brought it to his nose. This had to be what he’d seen Hannibal pour into a decanter earlier, in preparation for the light supper they’d enjoy once all the children had been put to bed. He’d seen Hannibal do it, had even jokingly warned the concierge to leave it alone unless he wanted Doctor Lecter’s wrath. That, he inhaled deeply, felt like a lifetime ago now.

“What are we drinking?”

And what were they drinking to.

“Château Haut-Brion. 2009, a good year.”

He’s not going to ask but he’s certain it was expensive. How expensive became clear once he raised the glass and took in its full aroma. Berries. Figs. Plums. Something spiced and subtle, with an edge to it that seemed to fold easily into the other avid flavors.

Will swallowed thickly, mouth and throat dry and lowered the glass.

This was the kind of thing one drank to celebrate something important. A birth. A death. The union of two people. The reaffirmation of a bond.

The resolution of the Clark Ingram problem.

It’s late by a few days but it didn’t matter. Will knew what this was. Hannibal commemorated their first date, their engagement, their anniversary, his birthday, the children’s birthdays, with wholehearted joy, even if the gesture was something as subtle as selecting a special wine for a dinner at home or a meaningful choice of dessert or table setting.

This wine was for his resurrection.

Adjacent to the fire, Hannibal sat, eyes closed in enjoyment, lost in the nose of the bordeaux.

“I should have called you first,” Will admitted, the words hushed, haltering.

“You should have,” the older man agreed, his tone grave but utterly without accusation.

Will took a shuddering inhale and felt his guilt tighten around his throat. “I should have walked Eli to the Mitchell’s, made sure she was inside first.”

Yes. That would have been the right thing to do. He was a father now, he had children to care about, just because he had lost twelve years of experience didn’t mean he was suddenly *stupid* .

Except what he’d done had been tonight was stupid, unforgivably stupid. Eli was *seven* , and he knew her, he *knew* . He should have guessed that she wouldn’t listen, that she’d try foolishly to follow him in a misguided attempt to look after him; omegas before alphas, Hannibal would always chide her when she went charging in first.

Standing at the light knock on their door, Hannibal went to greet the concierge. It wasn’t Matilda who had greeted them this afternoon, but the young British-Indian man who worked the evening shift, Harold or Henry. Rather than throw open the double doors to let the concierge and room service staff in to set up as usual, Hannibal took the food trolley himself and tipped them, shutting the door politely but firmly behind him.

Will let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, surprised by how tense he’d become at the mere suggestion of facing strangers.

Raising the cloche over each plate, Hannibal checked the selection before settling upon one to bring to the omega.

The question, which had been pressing against his chest for hours, edged up into his throat.

“What happened?”

Hannibal paused mid-motion.

“After I left you, what happened?”

The alpha straightened to his full statuesque silhouette. His features smoothly neutral, his husband studied him.

“Are you sure you want to know?” Hannibal said, tone casual, resuming the task of putting together a suitable supper.

No. He wasn’t.

Yes. Yes he did.

“No forensics. No paper trail. No connections. Nothing except what my instincts are telling me.”

Will licked his dry lips, his tongue scratchy and felt the urge to shrink away from his uncomfortable thoughts. “Probably better that I don’t.”

Plausible deniability .

As informal as his husband could get, Will had never known Hannibal to ever contemplate eating on the sofa. But that’s what the alpha seemed to suggest he do, when a napkin was draped over his lap followed a bowl of chicken consommé with julienned vegetables. Will blinked down at the soup as if it were a foreign thing, surprised.

It didn’t match the wine, he thought with a rising bewilderment, inappropriately and inexplicably amused. But maybe Hannibal had known all along that he wouldn’t drink the wine.

Yes, probably.

Taking a sip of the wine just to be contrary, he almost coughed at the strong taste of it in his dry mouth, feeling the liquid sting his parched and bruised throat. The finish lingered, the fragrance blooming on his tongue.

Leaning down by his side, Hannibal gave him a wry look and studied Will carefully for signs of regret, indecision or betrayal.

The omega reflected the assessment back at his husband.

The alpha’s face softened, his forgiveness writ plain across his features; nothing he could ever say or inflict upon Will would ever compare to the recriminations of the omega’s conscience. Though the younger man had disappointed him, he was just glad to have him here.

Will closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together.

Hannibal's palm was cool on his cheek, the sensation of his fingers interpreted by Will's frayed senses as something crawling over the side of his skull. "Agent Nasser has offered to drive you tomorrow to Quantico."

The omega thought back to the conversation between Moses and Hannibal out of earshot.

"And Eli?"

"Elizabeta will talk when she's ready."

You mean, after you've had time to teach her exactly what and what not to say.

A flinch coursed through his skeleton, fuelled by the horror that hadn't quite left him yet as he recalled the vision of their daughter, standing with the bloodied rock in her hands, her startled look flickering to satisfaction, which melted away into apprehension and confusion at the expression on Daddy's face.

They needed to talk about Eli. Not tonight, but soon.

"Elizabeta was defending me."

"She was," Hannibal agreed, sotto voce.

Moses was going to be disappointed that Elizabeta didn't come in together with him, Will predicted. Not that the beta would show it. Politically astute, the beta would pull out the stops to be hospitable to Will, mindful of the subtle threat contained in Hannibal's absence. The beta would choose one of the upper level conference rooms with a clear view of the Quantico green and pick up some good strong coffee and pastries from a cafe to put the omega at ease even if Will wasn't your usual omega witness.

"Clark Ingram was stunned but still moving," he murmured, feeling almost compelled to unload the words he'd been forming in his head, to rehearse this, "In the confusion, I yelled for Eli to go back to house."

"Then you followed her."

Yes.

"I didn't see what happened after that."

He hadn't wanted to see.

Hannibal nodded in agreement. "No you didn't."

Will took a deep breath, feeling a weight lift as the alpha stood and went back to his own chair.

"When Agent Nasser arrived, Clark Ingram had disappeared."

“He escaped,” Hannibal picked up his wine and took a small first sip. The taste drew a breath of appreciation and a momentary silence.

“Considering the average strength of a seven-year old, he was merely off balance. The man probably got up and made his way to his vehicle as soon as you were gone.”

Yes. Probably. Plausibly.

What evidence that might be recovered would support his statement.

What contradicted his statement and Elizabeta’s eventual statement could be easily excused by the poor weather.

He had been careful.

Will exhaled under his breath and picked up the spoon hesitantly. The bottom of the soup bowl was warm through the luxuriously thick cloth napkin laid over his lap, a sensation that seemed to burn through the cold he still felt, even after the hot shower had peeled off the gossamer layer of his skin.

“Clark Ingram’s on the run.”

“...Yes.”

Will frowned at the slight flicker of uncertainty in his own voice. Once evidence was found proving his accusation against Ingram, the FBI wouldn’t waste any more time investigating the attack. They would assume that Lounds saw something that Ingram didn’t mean for anyone to witness, whether the woman had known the significance of what she’d seen or not. By the end of the week, the FBI’s focus would completely shift to bringing the beta in. Ingram’s picture would go on the cork board, sent to schools, FBI field offices nationwide and the police. The media outlets would splash his mug across screens nationwide; notorious serial killer on the run always got good mileage.

Hannibal smiled gently at him.

“It’s late,” his alpha murmured, “Eat your soup.”

Waking from his exhausted slumber, Will blinked slowly, disoriented by the empty pillow across from him. He ran a heavy hand across Hannibal’s sheets. They were still warm. Uneasy at being alone in the unfamiliar bedroom after recent events, Will got up and pulled on his robe, wondering what had called Hannibal away. The man wasn’t in their ensuite, and it was - he glanced at the wall clock - too early for the alpha to be up for anything. There were no chores to do, not when they would be having breakfast downstairs in the hotel restaurant. Had one of the children woken up and decided to have a snack? Hannibal had made sure to have some cheese and fruit ordered up from the hotel kitchens; Will

remembered watching him put the small platter into the fridge, explaining that Tomas would know to look for it if Elizabeta woke in the middle of the night hungry after her adrenalin rush tonight.

“Hannibal?” He called quietly, mindful of keeping it down.

Passing through the study, he saw that the light in the dining area was on as expected. With a disgruntled sigh, he crossed his arms in annoyance and rounded the corner.

“Hannibal,” he began, and then froze.

An alarmed cry died in his chest. The hotel was soundproofed.

“No,” he whispered, the word slipping past his numb lips, frozen in horror.

No, no, no, NO.

Chest heaving with murderous exertion, a mud-wracked Clark Ingram turned from his fell prey. Will’s eyes flicked to the gun in Ingram’s tight grip and then the figure at his feet. Hannibal’s face was slack, a pool of blood slowly growing from where the bullet had gone through his chest, through and through.

Will felt his frame shudder, a visceral pain striking him in the chest, exploding across his solar plexus and gathering in his heart, the sensation strong enough to force him to his knees. Will kept standing, shaking in fury and loss and fear. He wanted to vomit.

Blood dripped down from where Elizabeta had struck him, but it didn’t bother the beta. *Clark Ingram took a step towards him.*

He took a step back.

The long shadows twisted like rattle-snakes and reached for him. No, *no* , he thought desperately to himself. This wasn’t happening, *he* couldn’t be here, and Hannibal - Will’s eyes flew again to his husband’s prone form, felt pain stab him deep as his entire being rebelled at the thought that the alpha was gone. It couldn’t be. *It couldn’t be* .

There’s a frightened yelp from behind Ingram.

Will’s eyes flew to Elizabeta’s shocked face, the little girl attracted by the noise to come out of Tomas’ attached suite.

It’s a glance of one second.

But that’s all it took.

With a murderous scowl, Ingram swung the gun up.

Adrenalin hit his body like a blast of hot air, omega-reflexes spinning him around and sending him huddling for cover before he’d even registered his thigh and calf muscles tensing to run. Cold chilling rain cut into him like needles. He threw himself behind the sofa just as

the shot went off, shattering the framed print above him. *Will squeezed his eyes shut and half-ran half-crawled, barely noticing as the shards scratched at him.*

Will unfroze the arms he'd thrown over his head.

He tumbled onto the sodden grass, breath catching at the chill of rain soaking into his pants.

Protect Eli, his brain chanted, protect Eli, protect Eli...

"Daddy!"

Gritting his teeth, the omega forced himself into a crouch and prepared to run in the opposite direction.

"Eli," he shouted, desperation and love and fear (*get Junior, wake Micah, help Tomas, leave, run, hide, call the police, RUN*) contained in that single cry. Out of the corner of his eye, Ingram spun to face the seven-year old, his gun arm wavering in its focus upon Will.

NO.

In a burst of desperation, Will rushed out from his hiding spot. There was no planning. He didn't even have time to think. Terror and love gripped him, making his vision blur. He slammed into the beta with his full body weight. The gun went off as they slammed into a tree, the sound loud as thunder.

Will felt his heart explode as his eyes snapped open to darkness.

Fumbling and feeling only cold sheets, he threw himself upright and reached for the bedside. The light came on, burning into his irises. The omega winced and blinked away the ghostly afterimages as his pupils adjusted, but the damage was done. His headache, which had calmed sometime during his nap, started to throb again. Will spun around, and -

Through the window, the moon winked at him from a wide cloud-whipped sky.

Pulse throbbing at his parched throat, Will forced himself to breathe through the terror squeezing at his chest. He was awake now. He was *awake* . It had been a dream. Just a dream. His mind was still processing the weekend, that's all; an overactive imagination and a sip too much of whisky and too little sleep. Clark Ingram was gone. *Gone.* He was safe. Elizabeta was *safe* . Hannibal had probably just gotten up to check on one of the children or read. Yes. That's probably it. Perfectly reasonable.

Fighting against the dread in the pit of his stomach, Will pulled on his robe and crept from the room, his steps tentative and unsteady.

They had checked out of the hotel late on Sunday.

He didn't know how Hannibal had managed to swing it, but instead of interviewing him at Quantico, Moses and the team had come to the house. It hadn't been a long interview; the FBI had started digging into Ingram before Jack Crawford had even finished calling him, and within hours of the arrest warrant being issued, Clark Ingram's personal graveyard of victims

had been found; he'd been burying them in the backyard of his latest client, a blind elderly man who didn't have much cause to go out back anymore.

He'd read the write-up on the weekend with a mixture of unease and detachment.

'Clark Ingram, beta male; police are anxious to interview Mister Ingram in connection with an assault on Saturday evening, on the 29th October 2016.'

The rest of the small article covered Clark Ingram's physical description, his background as a social worker, that he was also wanted in questioning regarding another case involving a string of murders. The writer injected as much allusion into the text as he or she could without making any false accusations. It mentioned the color and make of Ingram's vehicle, the number plate, and the final damning sentence: *'Members of the public are warned against approaching this man or challenging him in any way as police consider him to be dangerous when provoked.'*

And then Freddie Lounds checked out of hospital against medical advice, or any advice at all, somehow slipping both her FBI guard and the hospital staff.

THE FACE OF THE ALEXANDRIA STRANGLER, *tattle-crime.com* screamed that very evening.

The alpha had spent Monday morning taking appointments that couldn't be cancelled, then come home in time for a late lunch. With Tomas' sleepover called off, they had only needed to make a decision about whether to still send Micah over to Kathy Prescott's house for the evening, and if Tomas should join the Richardson's so he could spend Halloween with someone his age; Luke Richardson and a few of the neighbor's children would be going trick or treating together. Having decided yes to both, they had agreed to also let Micah stay the night; they would pick him up tomorrow on their way to the cabin.

Tonight will be fine, Hannibal had assured him when they'd finished talking, taking his hands and squeezing, the children would enjoy themselves with their friends while Hannibal took Junior around the neighborhood, with nothing for Will to do except rest with the doorbell unhooked and a dark porch to deter visitors. And tomorrow they'll go to cabin, a small break to put everything behind them and clear Will's head.

Then the alpha had gone downstairs to the butler kitchen to fetch the meal he'd prepared in advance – poached chicken breast in a French-style cream sauce, paired with a serving of vegetables – while he had gone upstairs to begin packing the basics. It had been exhausting, even that small chore, the act of reaching and pulling, wadding up superhero t-shirt and matching shorts, Micah's soft wooly house robe that was almost an exact miniature of the one that Will used.

The omega took a deep breath as he got to the bottom of the stairs, toes curling at the chill.

There was a light coming from the lounge area.

Winston noticed him first, padding over to rub against Will's knee. Dee raised her head briefly to check that it was nothing worth getting up for before slumping down again over her

paws; there's no reaction from Napoleon, who snoozed on, his years wearing on him this late in the evenings.

Looking up from the mail he was perusing, his husband's warm smile disappeared when he caught the expression on the omega's face. Hannibal put down his glass of wine and shifted, his body language an open invitation for his mate to join him. Taking a deep breath, Will curled up on the couch and laid his head in the alpha's lap, screwing his eyes shut as he almost hummed in relief at the familiar pressure across his scalp. For several long breaths, there was simply blessed silence, empty except for the whispers of the night, measured by the tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the hallway and Hannibal's gentling strokes.

"What happened?" He finally asked, voice hoarse from disuse and fighting against the urge to hang his head in shame as the afternoon's memories replayed in his head again and again now that he'd shaken off the fog of sleep.

"After-" *after he had run away*; Will inhaled sharply against the pang in his chest, "After I went upstairs?"

Hannibal stroked a knuckle across his still healing cheek.

"We talked," the alpha murmured.

As if it were that simple.

A bitter laugh silently rocked through his diaphragm. Maybe it was, for the alpha anyway; Hannibal wasn't the one who had been *so stupid* that he'd almost gotten their daughter killed, or the one whose opening gambit to get Elizabeta to talk about Saturday night had ended with the little girl running off, inconsolable because no matter how Will had tried to explain to her that she could never do that again, *never ever* , all she'd heard was that Daddy was angry with her. That's not even close to what he said, but he supposed that one year of deep-end of the pool parenthood didn't make up for twelve years of experience on subterfuge, keeping on topic and avoiding emotional landmines.

Like he knew what Will was thinking, his husband smoothed a hand over his shoulder and squeezed.

"There's nothing to worry about."

But it was all he worried about right now.

Will cleared his throat, "I should talk to her again."

"Eventually…" Hannibal agreed, though his delayed reply implied otherwise.

The insecurities, those little niggling thoughts at night over his own inadequacies as a parent washed over him, a hot flush of shame and frustration.

"I know you want to talk to her but-"

“But you don’t,” Will smiled bitterly, because of course, why would anyone? He’d caused this whole situation in the first place and couldn’t even clean up after himself.

“You know that’s not what I meant, Will.”

No, that wasn’t what the alpha meant; his husband trusted him with the children, trusted him even after the events of the *complete fucking mess* that was Saturday night. They’d talked about Elizabeta until the small hours yesterday, trying to be prepared for when they spoke to her today. All his plans, scripted, contingent or otherwise, had evaporated instantly when Eli had looked up at him, shaking in anger and heartbreak, and promptly burst into tears. He honestly didn’t know what happened after that, too swept up in the seven-year old’s upset to be rational.

Sighing deeply, Will closed his eyes, pressing back into the warmth of the alpha’s touch.

“Are you hungry?”

He wasn’t, but he knew that it would make Hannibal feel better; he hadn’t eaten anything since brunch and that was about fourteen hours ago. Nodding, he let himself to pulled up and away into the kitchen. Only Winston followed them, the slow sleepy clicks of his paws barely getting an ear flick from the other two, too comfortable in front of the heated fireplace.

“*Casunziei di patate e ricotta forte* ,” the alpha decreed upon setting him up at the counter with some tea, already tying his apron with sure quick movements, “A pasta dish I once had in a town overlooking Lake Santa Croce, stuffed with potato and a selection Italian cheeses, in a simple sauce of shaved onions and potatoes simmered in olive oil, topped with thinly-sliced smoked ricotta. It was one of the most comforting meals I've ever had.”

And filling, with all that starch and cheese; was this supposed to be supper or early breakfast?

Will crossed his arms over the central benchtop and felt his mood lightened despite himself; surely it was rare to despair over the fact that your husband was apparently the happiest man alive? He snorted under his breath, his amusement pushing aside his exhaustion for the moment.

“Sounds good.”

As always, there’s something hypnotic about the way Hannibal moved in the kitchen, clearly in his element, peeling, dicing, knife making short work of the potatoes for the stuffing, everything timed so well that it came together like some kind of complicated dance. It’s relaxingly familiar, and kept his mind occupied enough to not feel like he’d go insane from the self-doubts and recriminations that continued to heckle at him.

“After I found Eli in the orchard, we went into Middleburg for some ice cream,” Hannibal said suddenly, olive oil drizzling into the heated pan in swirls. The diced onions followed, hissing in the heat. “We talked on the drive in.”

And?

Will swallowed, mouth dry, and reached for the tea; apparently, it was to help his stomach calm down and digest the meal better but hopefully it would also soothe the churning.

“She asked if you were alright,” Hannibal stirred the onions a few more times before turning down the heat, meeting the omega’s wide-eyed stare with a gentle smile, eyes soft with that tenderness he reserved for his mate and offspring, “Seems that while we were worrying ourselves over her emotional state, she was far more worried about yours.”

“Me?”

Turning away to the fridge, Hannibal withdrew several wrapped packages from the cheese drawer, peeling back the corner of each. His eyes fluttered shut as he waved them under his nose, using the aromas to guide his selection; the only scent Will could pick out was Parmesan. “You almost died, Will. From Eli’s point of view, that’s what happened that night; that is her trauma, that she almost lost you.”

Will covered his face, self-loathing pulsing hot and ugly under his skin. God. He hadn’t even thought about *that* once the moment had passed. Why hadn’t he, a voice accused him. This shouldn’t be news, this should be obvious. And yet he’d been so wrapped up in self-blame and fear of exposure that he hadn’t *seen.*

Him - his chest gave a death-rattle of a laugh - an omega who could see inside the minds of monsters, who could read histories from glances and flinches, who could trace intentions from cuts and bruises, who could get so deep inside killers that he sometimes lost himself, had utterly failed to notice the most basic of fears in his own child. What was the *point* of all this empathy if he couldn’t use it the way it was meant to be used by omegas?

“In a way, I’m proud of her.”

He frowned, uneasy.

“She tried to kill someone, Hannibal.”

Scanning the perturbed look on his omega’s face with a neutral expression, Hannibal resumed cooking, stirring in the diced potatoes.

“Actually, she tried to save someone.”

Will swallowed against the hard lump lodged in the soft of his esophagus.

“I know it’s not an ideal example of success but I tried to teach her - to teach all our children - the importance of protecting those we love.” The alpha gave him a pointed look, spatula pausing momentarily in their circular motion, “She loves you, Will. You’re her father, a source of special joy and comfort. While she would have done no less for me or her brothers, you’re different - you carried her for nine months and gave her life, and she knows this.”

Will took a heavy sip of tea, swallowing thickly, wishing it were whisky instead. The liquid seemed to pool at the base of his throat, burning into his clavicles.

As though he knew that this conversation was getting a little too pointed to stomach, Hannibal half-covered the potatoes to soften in the trapped heat and changed the topic.

“Have you heard of Enzo Deprà?”

Mutely, Willl shook his head, not sure what this person had to do with anything.

“He's a chef, who was the son and grandson of chefs. My aunt, uncle and I dined at his family’s restaurant at the Hotel Dolada of Pieve D’Alpago in the Belluno Province when he had still been head of the kitchens there.”

Grudgingly, from somewhere beneath the slippery surface of his fragile composure, Will felt a tired smile tug at his mouth; he always enjoyed Hannibal’s stories about Uncle Robertas and Aunt Murasaki, a simple and happy time in his husband’s childhood. It’s obviously meant as a distraction, but a much appreciated one.

“*Casunziei di patate e ricotta forte* is one of his recipes, from a four-course set menu that we sampled there one evening,” Hannibal told him, removing the potato and onions from the heat to cool on the side, “We intended to stay there one night only and see the dolomites before a trip through the Prosecco vineyards on our way down to Venice, but we ended up staying several nights more to enjoy the area.”

Taking out another saucepan, Hannibal set the gas hob to medium.

“I’ll never forget the view that first morning from our breakfast table.” There’s another swirl of olive oil before the sliced onions were scooped into the pan. They whisper quietly as they’re sauteed, sweating in the steady low heat of the oil until they’re clear and sweet. “The early morning sun was coming from the side, while the fog was rolling off from the peaks as a strong wind came down from the north; I would have been afraid that I was witnessing the beginnings of an avalanche, if it wasn’t for the semi-translucent quality of the ‘snow’.”

Using the flat of his knife, the alpha swept the potatoes straight into the pan from the chopping board, pausing to stroke a finger along the blade to catch all the stray bits. Once the sauce was simmering away, Hannibal looked up to check that he hadn’t lost his audience before washing and drying his hands to make the pasta.

“Every human being is capable of committing violent acts. Age is no barrier,” said Hannibal, in a tone that made it unclear if he was speaking rhetorically or to Will, his hands already measuring out the flour and water, eggs wobbling on the counter at the ready for the next step.

“Are we talking perpetration or victimhood?”

Hannibal studied his mate’s tired features, a glimmer of caution behind his brown eyes.

“There are no guarantees in life, Will, we know that better than anyone else. As terrible as the weekend was, we all walked away.”

Well, someone didn't.

And he wasn't sure he had walked away. Considering the persistent nightmares, he may as well have never left those woods.

"What doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

The alpha glanced at him from across the countertop, pointedly not reacting to the blistering sarcasm except for a wry twist of his lips.

Will took a desultory sip of tea and rubbed at his eyes. The smell of Hannibal's delicious cooking was almost overwhelming now, and despite the late hour, his stomach was reacting to it, shuddering to life and wetting his mouth.

"Cancer, a brain tumor, an accident, being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Hannibal continued, his hands shaping and reshaping the dough on the floured countertop, "Anything can happen, Will, and as parents we can lessen the risks of living but not eliminate them."

"Dignity of risk," he chuckled bitterly.

It made everything seem *so* reasonable. That Freddie Lounds investigating Clark Ingram may or may not have caused the beta to come after Alana. That his visit to check on Alana Bloom could have gone a different way and it was just unfortunate that things happened the way they did. That just because Eli was headstrong didn't make it certain that she'd come after him, or that Will should have been able to preempt her next move.

Wrong time. Wrong place.

"No one could have predicted the events of the weekend; it's chaos theory at its finest," With a detour to check on the sauce, Hannibal washed his hands thoroughly and dried them. The pasta sheets were already cut and shaped and ready for stuffing. "Though if one were to try and set the blame, Clark Ingram set off the chain of events long ago when he made up his mind to kill his first victim."

"It isn't mathematics, Hannibal," he said darkly, agitated by his husband's attempts to rationalize things, because he didn't need to be *coddled*. "It's poor judgement."

Taking out one of the larger pots, Hannibal filled it with water and set it to boil, meeting his omega's glare with stoic calm. "Elizabeta didn't want to leave the party, and asked to stay longer. You gave her fifteen minutes. If you had said no, what would have happened?"

They would have delivered Alana home earlier by fifteen minutes, and been already at the hotel when Jack Crawford rang. Hannibal tracked the thoughts as they broadcast through his face with the alpha's characteristic patience, and nodded faintly at the realization on the younger man's face; would Alana have been in time to receive the FBI's warning? Would it have been too late? Would Alana be in a morgue right now?

"And if you had said yes and stayed the extra thirty minutes, what would have happened?"

He would have gotten the call from Jack Crawford while he was on his way to Alana's house. He would have turned around and taken Alana back to the hotel.

Will exhaled deeply and rubbed at his face, “Something other than what did happen.”

Something better.

“And if there was a car accident on your way back?”

He’s silent for all of one shocked beat.

“Boy, you sure know how to spoil the mood.”

Hannibal cocked an eyebrow, undeterred from his point; “Car accidents are statistically more likely than being targeted by a serial killer.”

Will sighed in sardonic long-suffering, “Except when you’re with the BAU, then I think it's the other way around, don't you?”

Because he was secretly as inappropriate as Will at his most disagreeable, his husband let out a quiet chuckle.

With an expression of exquisite concentration, Hannibal unwrapped the cheeses he had picked out earlier, grating a portion of each into the pan of cooling potatoes and onions, followed by a pinch of salt and pepper and a tiny spoonful of something darker, more mysterious.

“Hindsight can be very damaging to one’s faith in one’s ability to make decisions, Will, but that does not mean one stops.”

His brows pinched together as his husband’s words registered properly, “Wait, are you *psychoanalyzing* me? Are we doing this now?”

Hannibal straightened to give him an innocent look that would have worked much better if he wasn’t also smiling in that way of his, the one that said that he was eminently charming and if you could excuse him just this one time, please?

Will scowled back, irritated.

The alpha folded the cheese into the potatoes and onions. Two eggs followed with a crack, before finally, the entire thing was mixed and separated out into spoonfuls over the waiting pasta skins, folded and sealed. The process was a lot quicker than Will expected, but then Hannibal knew exactly what he was doing.

“You are no more at fault for what happened than if you had been bitten by a mad dog.”

“Mad dogs get put down.”

Will inhaled sharply and squeezed the back of his neck. He hadn’t meant to say that.

Sure you did, his shadow drawled, *he had it coming.*

“Why do you insist on taking responsibility for what no one could have predicted?”

But he could have predicted it. He'd seen her discontent and confusion as he'd made her put on that poncho. He'd sent Eli reluctantly in the direction of the Mitchell's. He'd watched her figure turning into where the vegetable patch began. And then he'd turned away, walked away, not checking, *not once*.

Will chuckled, an ugly humorless croaking, that familiar pang of regret digging at his chest once more.

"I'm not a butterfly, Hannibal."

"No you are not," the alpha agreed, his tone light, "You're the hurricane."

He blinked, not sure how to respond to the sudden zig in the conversation. Was Hannibal saying he was destructive or was it supposed to be a compliment? It's a weird analogy, the teasing edge to it at complete odds with his maudlin mood and the heavy subject. It's also just like his odd, odd alpha.

The omega opened his mouth to reply and then closed it again, his chest rumbling in inappropriate laughter. It's suddenly hilarious, what they're talking about, and he had no idea why.

From across the counter, Hannibal gave him a slow pleased smile, the manipulative bastard.

Dropping each parcel delicately into the pot with a slotted spoon, the alpha adjusted the heat of the stove until he achieved a gentle boil, mindful of too much rocking ruining his hard work, then checked his wristwatch. The unused ingredients go back to their places while the leftover uncooked pasta go into a glass bowl, wrapped in muslin.

"Cousin Giulietta wrote."

Will cocked an eyebrow, "Giulietta, who sent wine for my birthday?"

His husband hummed in agreement, wiping down the counters and pulling open the dishwasher, his movements as succinct as when he had been making a mess. There wasn't much to clean up.

"Your wine penpal, Vino Giulietta," Will said, just to be absolutely certain they were talking about the same person; there were at least three Giulietta Sforza though technically, one was a Sforza-Bastianelli and the other Aconati-Sforza.

His husband gave him a vaguely amused look, "Yes."

Opening one of the cabinets behind him, Hannibal took out two pasta plates along with their matching underplate and began to set up the counter for two. "She's invited us to the Sforza family reunion. It'll be in the last week of February at Lake Como, centred at the Villa d'Este."

So four weeks before the Spring Equinox, giving unmated alphas a chance to meet prospective mates within the extended family and a good several months after last year's heat season, just in time to announce any pregnancies. There was a smaller annual gathering

among the proper Sforza families but considering that this invitation included Hannibal, it was probably the twenty-five year reunion that included anyone with more than a thimble of Sforza blood and all the godchildren too.

“The last reunion was in 1992,” Hannibal reminisced with a faint smile; steam swirled up and around the man’s face as the pasta was drained and plated, drawing attention to his deep focus on the task at hand, “I was twenty-three, just finished with my first year as a registrar at Johns Hopkins, and uncertain of where I wanted my life to go. Going to Italy to meet my mother’s brothers seemed like good idea.”

“That’s the year you worked in Florence.”

“Yes, at the *Ospedale Santa Maria Nuova*,” the alpha slanted him an appreciative look for recalling the throwaway detail from one of their 3AM chats. “Some of my fondest memories in Italy were from that time.”

Pasta plated and framed by a valley of thick silky sauce, Hannibal carefully sliced and slid several slivers of cold smoked ricotta on top of everything. Will watched them melt almost immediately in the steamy wet heat.

Walking around the counter, Hannibal served it to him with a kiss against his brow.

“Bon appetit,” his husband said tenderly.

Staring down at the plate of food, Will picked up his fork and took a bite. The shock of pleasure to his tastebuds, the creamy cheese and warm fluffy potatoes, the sauce simultaneously savory, sweet and smoky, traveled through his whole body as a tremor.

There was love in the food, not a flimsy momentary affection but something deeper, filled with patience, comfort, care and effort, *so much effort* ; Will cleared his throat, self-conscious and reached for the man. Hannibal caught his fingers and squeezed them tightly, as if he knew everything that Will wasn’t saying.

He had been dozing on the couch when Beverly Katz arrived, waking with a start to the sound of the dogs tearing down the long hallway to leap on the front door at the sound of her knocks. He hadn’t been expecting anyone and so to his embarrassment, greeted her while in t-shirt and shorts with nothing in the way of preserving his modesty except his house robe. After some awkward shuffling, he'd gotten dressed while she watched Junior for him.

With her beanie pulled off and her hair falling in loose waves along her right side, Beverly Katz twisted around at the sound of the back door opening and closing and accepted the mug handed to her with an air of excited anticipation.

“I’d ask if this was Doctor Lecter’s famous coffee but the smell pretty much gives that away.”

“Yeah he makes good coffee,” Will replied distractedly, covering his eyes against the afternoon glare to scan the horizon.

In the distance, Junior ran from the bricked smokehouse to the picnic table, the dogs following eagerly at his heels, doing a good job of herding the boy away from the tree line.

“Try amazing,” the woman corrected, taking an eager sip and promptly falling into the kind of worshipful silence reserved for ambrosia. Will hid his grin and took a sip from his own mug, carefully lowering himself down to join her on the porch steps.

“Oh wow,” she breathed upon finishing her first swallow, licking her lips with something akin to wonder, “Hmm-hum, yup, I think I understand why Jimmy got a caffeine high just from standing next to you when you brought your thermos down to the labs.”

He laughed softly, the sound low and startling.

“Not that it’s not nice to see you, but how did you find me?”

When he had been driven to the cabin last winter break, Hannibal had made it pretty clear that the address was a closely-guarded family secret, known only to the select trusted few. This was their retreat from the world, a place away from Baltimore society, off-record and unknown to the FBI. While the alpha hadn’t yet experienced any issues with his patients, the man liked to be prepared for every contingency and had purchased the property shortly after Tomas had been born. It had come in handy three years ago when the children needed somewhere safe to stay at until Hannibal had righted the FBI investigative whirlwind that had torn through their home.

It took effort but Beverly came up for air to answer him, her breath steaming lightly in the late afternoon chill, “I called up a friend at the IRS and told them to look up your tax records for other properties in Doctor Lecter’s name. It was easy after that.”

“An excellent use of FBI resources.”

The woman shrugged philosophically. “Gotta get my kicks somewhere - I’m not married to Gordon Ramsay.”

“Who?”

“Gordon Ramsay,” she repeated, and then at his completely blank stare, added, “You know, Kitchen Nightmares? Hell’s Kitchen? Hotel Hell?”

Will shook his head because nope, she might as well have been speaking Greek.

Beverly shook her head at him, “Reality TV, Will, geez. What do *you* do when it’s 4AM and you’re wide awake and can’t get a massage and a pedicure?”

He shrugged with a small grin and took another sip of his drink. In his peripheral vision, he noted Junior pausing to pick at something on the ground - the omega tensed but quickly relaxed again - the dogs didn't seem interested, so it was probably only a pebble or something.

"Are you okay?"

Will chuckled; now that was a difficult question. "Define okay."

Beverly's smile beamed on but just as quickly beamed off again, other thoughts crowding her face. She looked away with a sharp inhale, obviously holding back, trying to find the right manner to navigate this social interaction with a concern that only the genuinely kind displayed. "I know it's a stupid thing to ask considering that none of us could possibly be okay doing what we do. But are you okay?"

"I'm…" Will took a deep silent breath and finally met her inquisitive gaze, "Compartmentalizing."

Beverly Katz nodded slowly.

"And Eli?" She asked softly, carefully, wary of overstepping the boundaries of their friendship, of being insensitive.

Will glanced down and away, his eyes drawn to motion in the far left of the horizon. A familiar dark shape rounded the linchpin turn that connected their well-camouflaged gravel driveway to the dirt track that that connected them and the surrounding property, Lammergeier Farms, to the main roads.

"She's okay, couple of scraps and a few bruises..."

That's not what she's asking but Beverly nodded anyway, as if that was exactly what she meant and he hadn't just tried to sidestep the question. It's hard to talk about this even though it's all he's been talking about with Hannibal these past few days. It's impossible to talk to someone else.

"Well, if you need anything…"

Will smiled weakly at the offer, knowing it was genuine.

"Checking up on me can't be the only reason you're here."

"No," she admitted, turning her attention back to the antics happening off in the distance. "We found Clark Ingram. He's dead. Hannibal was there when I went to tell Doctor Bloom, and he thought it might be better if I told you."

Will nodded slowly at the news, fingers tightening around the hot hard surface of his mug until the pain made his hands shake and exhaled slowly. Clark Ingram had been breathing the last time that he'd seen him, he told himself; they'd done nothing but stand back and let nature take it's course.

That's not quite how I remember it , his shadow murmured coyly.

Shush.

Will forced himself to put down the the mug, rubbed his hot painful palms together. "Did you want to stay for dinner?"

He's surprised her. It's writ plain across her face. It was one thing for him to share his coffee, and another for them to have their usual witty repartee in the labs, but they weren't this kind of friendly and never had been. She'd never thought that would change.

"Sure," She beamed, "I've love to."

No one saw him walk through the woods. No one saw the large shape slung over his shoulder. A large burden even for a grown alpha, yet it caused him no difficulty, his steps sure and nimble, the steps of an alpha who looked after his physical health, who liked to show off on the dance floor. From time to time, he would stop and tilt his face up to the sky, close his eyes, take in the scents around him. Then he would continue on. He prowled on underneath the cover of trees like a predator dragging prey back to his territory. It was enthralling. He was energized. He increased his speed upon hearing the rush of water. He did not wish to discard the body casually. He wanted it to be found in a specific manner.

At last, the river.

He looked over his shoulder. Not a soul to be seen or heard or scented. He remained still and standing, relaxing in the quiet tranquility. He's enjoying himself. The forest was like an huge organism, it breathed, it watched him, it shielded him with its rustling shadows.

With roughness not shown up to this point, he righted his burden, the beta who had overreached and been shown his place. The beta breathed but he would never be conscious again.

Pride swelled in his heart as he recounted the moments that had brought him to this moment here in the woods, unseen and unheard. It was due to a child, of course; those wonderful, inexplicable creatures, forever surprising him with their capriciousness and capacity for cruelty.

He had given his mate children dutifully, and vaguely enjoyed their milky skin, their beaming smiles, their adoration, as protective as any creature who had sired young. His mate was exceptional, yes, as was he, but there had been no guarantees that their uniqueness would find expression in the next generation… Evidently he should have had more faith.

A slow smile stretched his mouth.

They’re on the edge together, the beta’s limbs malleable as a marionette’s. There’s something almost joyous about the moment, despite his serious concentration. When he cast off the weight, he watched the shadowed limbs tumble down the rocks, listened for the splash.

It’s sweet music.

Emotions surged inside him, a mixture of relief, satisfaction and wistfulness. How blessed was he that this happened? Eager to get back to his family, he quickened his pace, tasted the phantom pleasures of his omega’s skin in his mouth, felt his blood heat as he envisioned his beloved, his lungs full with adoration.

Life was good.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. I've been missing for months because I'm an idiot who wanted to test my therapy and so got a job teaching art history. It was empowering but it was also terrible because I found I couldn't handle anything else except writing the course and the class, and so I stopped reading fic, socialising and writing and ended up in a horrible cycle of doing nothing but work and therapy because I couldn't handle anything else. I also had the flu twice in the last six months - well, this last time, which I'm currently still sick from, technically is two bouts of flu, as I got a secondary infection.
But enough blubbering. I hope everyone enjoyed this part; I wrote half of it in February and March, and the other half in the last two weeks, after several comments inspired me to get back into it because dammit, they reminded me of the delight I'd get from messing with people through the story lol
The aftermath of Ingram and all the consequences aren't fully played out yet but you'll just have to see :)

Levanta Muertos

Chapter Summary

> Chasing one's tail. A dinner guest. Hot chocolate at midnight. Returning to the scene of the crime. And it's always time for ice cream.

Chapter Notes

> This is long long chapter with some time manipulation for effect; I've tried to make it follow-able but in case there's confusion, let me know. As always no beta, but enjoy! The title lit means 'dead riser' and yes, it's food - specifically hangover food

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What would happen if one of us goes?”

The lighter mood that he had clung to during their late supper had slipped from his grasp despite his best efforts to keep it, to hold himself here in the room. That he was Will Graham-Lecter and he was thirty-nine years old, lying on the sofa with his head propped up on his alpha’s thigh, staring up the faintly flickering shadows of the fireplace upon the living room of their country house outside of Middleburg, the aniseed aroma of some foreign tea that his husband made for him brewing on the sideboard.

Beneath the curve of his skull, Hannibal’s thigh flexed as the man angled his torso to his right to take a sip of wine.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“If something happens to us…” Will swallowed, a weight pressing across the stretch of his solar plexus making him almost nauseous, “Where would the kids go? If something happened.”

Will had no idea why they hadn’t talked about this earlier. They probably had, once upon a time, but this was now and even after what had gone wrong with Budge, he hadn’t thought about it, too relieved that it had worked out and too eager to put it all behind that he hadn’t considered it, hadn’t planned. It was ridiculous, and irresponsible, shortsighted that he had never asked, considering that his father was in absolutely no condition to take on four children and Hannibal had no close relations whom they could turn to for help.

They'd talked about what would happen if one of them should be fall seriously ill or be grievously injured either by accident or at work, or worse, have an attempt on their lives that succeeded. But Will didn't remember them ever talking seriously about the possibility that both of them might be taken, or that the threat might be directed at one of the children.

Hannibal's hand curled over the base of his throat before spreading over Will's chest, as if he knew about the stagnant knot of bitterness, the weight of disappointment. "There are contingencies in place; Marie or Alana would act as primary carer until my cousin, Chiyoh, is contacted and arrives to take over."

Will frowned a little. While he knew that his previous self would never agree to someone untrustworthy to be their children's guardian, he also wouldn't be satisfied with the decision until he met this mysterious cousin. In pragmatic terms, Chiyoh was most suitable on paper out of all of Hannibal's relations; she was Will's age, young enough to take on the physical demands of children, mature enough to handle the emotional and mental burdens; a beta whom had grown up exclusively among alphas and omegas, she spoke English and French along with her native Japanese so communication wouldn't be an issue, and as a bachelorette, independently wealthy, had the freedom to pick up and go where and when she wished. If something happened to them, she could be on the plane within the hour.

At the omega's silence, Hannibal added, "If you want the full details, I can request a copy of the paperwork from Ms. Perrineau."

Capturing his husband's hand, Will pressed it to his lips in silent thanks.

Hannibal tilted his head to gaze down on him, the lines and edges of his face almost alien in the shadows cast by the fireplace. "It still haunts you," murmured the alpha, the tenderness of the whispered observation at odds with his lack of expression.

Will turned onto his side, desperate to avoid knowing what Hannibal saw in his face.

"I knew from the moment I turned the car around," Bitterness made him enunciate, each word sharp with antipathy, "that I was taking Elizabeta into a potentially dangerous situation – and yet, I didn't predict the consequences."

"What you do is reconstruction, Will, not clairvoyance."

"Isn't it?"

The only reason his abilities were considered a professional skill versus some aberration of birth was due his post-grad from George Washington University, as if an education in forensics, a bit of independent research, a piece of paper and being an omega could explain away his knack.

"That's what I'm supposed to do with the reconstructions, isn't it? Get into their heads, stop the next one."

Hand cupping the underside of his jaw, the alpha tilted his face to look back at him.

“You did stop it.”

Such faith.

Will exhaled sharply through his nose and twisted away, burying his face against the man’s leg, feeling the stir of hamstring muscles calibrating, stretching and contracting under his cheek. There was no need to reiterate the rest of the gory details. He had recounted enough times with arrested breaths, his fingers stiff in the sheets as his muscles coiled in flight, his body responding as if Hannibal was the threat in the darkness of the bedroom, lying there next to each other like strangers because he had leaned away from the alpha’s touches, suspicious of how they dulled his anguish, comforted yet stubborn against having his guilt assuaged. He closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of expensive wool.

“If you had walked away that night and something had happened to Alana, we would still be in the same place,” With a touch that was almost too delicate to be from an alpha, Hannibal stroked two fingers through the curls that fell over his ear before sinking all five digits into his hair, a firm precise touch that spoke as much of his medical experience as his familiarity with Will’s body, sending a blush of sensation that curled all the way down his spine, making him want to arch back and respond.

“Which is?”

“Self-recrimination,” the alpha murmured softly, “Over things you had no control over.”

So it was back to the butterfly versus the hurricane.

His skin prickled the longer he didn’t respond, pleasure and pain struggling for dominance within him until they twisted together and boiled over in a flare of frantic energy. Pushing the alpha away, Will leaped to his feet, his temper flaring as the exhaustion of his shadow-boxing was pulled under by a tsunami of hot anger.

“Grant me the serenity?” He said with a smile, flashing his teeth as a multitude of hostility raged beneath his skin, the slings and arrows of his mind flipping inside out to focus on the alpha. A dozen utterances, each more hurtful than the next, flowing like bile across the furrows of his tongue, because that the problem with being so close to another, wasn’t it? Lashing out would be so easy right now.

Sense returned swiftly along with a double dose of shame. Will swallowed hard and reached up to cover his face; there was a reason he preferred to be alone when he was in a mood. He went to the sideboard, the tea he had been reluctant to try suddenly the only thing he was interested in.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Hannibal stand, his movements slow as though he were approaching a wounded or dangerous animal. Will felt a cry and a laugh shudder in the chasm between his ribcage, because wasn’t every creature dangerous when wounded?

“A hard lesson.”

But one that the alpha had learned, of course, to be so well-adjusted.

“The critical spirit rises up against self with the sole intention to consume,” continued the alpha.

Adoration and admiration seemed far away with jealousy and hatred forcing themselves to the forefront. Pouring a cup of tea with none of the grace that his husband would have used upon the task, Will took a sip of the strange concoction, letting it’s licorice taste wash away the bloody film on his tongue.

“But instead of emerging from the smelting process greater and more purified, it devours itself and takes cynical pleasure in leaving behind only ruins.”

An act of emotional self-cannibalism, was what the alpha meant.

Will shuddered at the first touch, the thin skin on the side of his neck fluttering in response to the forthright grasp over his shoulders, almost too hard to be called gentling yet exactly what he needed right now.

The alpha pressed a kiss to back of his head, his voice still lowered to his most diplomatic register.

“Prolonged self-denigration is a form of indirect self-glorification.”

He gave a derisive snort, before sobering as the idea took root in the cresting stream of his thoughts. Because to hold himself responsible for everything that had happened on Saturday and all the consequences of them was to liken himself to something beyond human; the sole originator of the evil, the only one whose actions mattered in the scheme of things. Interesting way to tell him something that he already knew; that he carried a certain arrogance.

“Get over yourself or else?” Will would smile, if it he still had it in him to smile; apparently, he was about to lapse into official bad taste, for daring to think of himself as Heinrich Heine’s Atlas.

“Is that what you tell your patients?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him. With a sigh, the alpha withdrew, the cool left his wake making Will finally turn around. His husband retrieved his wine glass from the side table for a long drink, much needed from the way he drank it without his usual indulgence and joined the omega once more on the far side of the room.

“Most of my patients are professionally successful and having their intimacy needs met, more or less.”

Will noted the familiar turn of phrase, *his* turn of phrase.

“So why do they come back?”

Giving him a smile that reminded him of those late evenings when they’d just met again, when Will was still making up his mind about the man who was his husband, Hannibal finished the last of his wine and poured himself another glass. “They need me to tell them

that they deserve their success, and remind them that they are well-adjusted, healthy people; that melancholy is not a prerequisite for depth or sensitivity, among other things."

At that, Will almost scoffed. "The imposter syndrome," he said quietly instead.

He meant it as ridicule, but he was an imposter, wasn't he? He wasn't Will Graham-Lecter, not really, thirty-nine, mated, with four children and three dogs and a monograph that must have taken a year or more to write, FBI teacher and consultant to the BAU by day, murderous mastermind by night. He was barely Will Graham-Lecter at all, even if he was trying as hard as he could. Deep inside, he was twenty-five, adrift in Baltimore with no one but an alpha he'd known barely a year, unable to sleep at night without getting up just one more time to check on his new baby, a tiny human with his nose and eyes and lips.

Hannibal put down the decanter and side-eyed him in a way that reminded him strongly of the way Tomas did, a gaze that went straight through him. Will resisted the urge to step back.

"You were a very different person when we met."

The omega stared back, panic gripping him for one breathless moment. Will forced himself to keep breathing anyway, because the alpha didn't mean it like that; Hannibal was still regarding him with that look which broadcasted the omega's undisputed position as his favorite person in the world. No, his husband was talking about the adjustment of being at once twenty-five, single, childless, unmoored and listless in his mourning, shattered, his vision of his life somehow having not accounted for death and the emotional complications of attachment, and simultaneously middle-aged, enjoying the fruits of his forgotten self's hard-won territory - professional respect, financial security, love, family.

"I was young."

Naïve. Undisciplined. Graceless.

Hannibal's mouth quirked, something akin to sympathy in his eyes, "You were lonely."

"I'm not lonely."

Not anymore.

Hannibal's smile grew before it sobered again, "And yet, the threat of a return to loneliness is at the core of your current predicament."

Will wished that he could pull at the threads of the lasso that his husband had cunningly woven around him with just a few simple lines, not wanting to go where Hannibal was leading him. Instead he took a deep breath, and let his silence speak for itself.

The alpha came to him, hands running down his arms before coming back up to cup his jaw. It was a gesture that would normally draw an immediate response, making Will want to melt into the offered intimacy but today, he couldn't bring himself to quite slip into that state of mind; that anger which had followed him since Elizabeta's confrontation with Clark Ingram

snapped and simmered in the back of his skull, agitated by the growing calm that spread through his limbs.

“I haven’t exactly been pulling up my side of the bargain.”

“Is that what we have? A bargain?” Hannibal tilted his head to catch his eyes, mouth quirked, a wistful expression that turned to something tender and poignant as he reeled Will in. There’s a moment of resistance but then he’s slumped against the older man, his weariness overcoming his reluctance.

“Tomas is upset with me.”

Another misstep. Another failure.

Not that his firstborn had done or said anything, still the ever responsible and helpful omega eldest child. Tact should have been Tomas’ middle name, not Victoire.

“Tomas is reacting to your feelings.”

And what exactly were his feelings again? Will tightened his grip on Hannibal’s jumper, shaking with the familiar rocking and froing of his confused mind. No matter how he tried in the daylight hours to stay in his body, to enjoy this unexpected opportunity of uninterrupted quality time with the children, to be present when Hannibal tried to talk to him about the Verger’s Christmas ball, involve him in planning their winter season of dinner parties, opera and exhibition openings; he’d inevitably become aware of his thoughts interfering, distracting him with memories he didn’t like, and vague warnings of oppressive doubt and empty despair.

“The ordinary response to terrible events is to banish them from consciousness.”

“That requires denial.”

Hannibal continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “Equally powerful to denial is the conviction that denial does not work.”

Will snorted under his breath; the last thing he needed was to share his experience of humiliation with a stranger.

Bless him, Hannibal tried again; “Hailing from the South, I’m sure you’re familiar with folk wisdom, those stories rife with ghosts who refuse to rest until their stories are told.”

It wasn’t often that Will’s origins as a southern rube was brought up as a positive, rather than an unfortunate fact that Hannibal enjoyed ignoring.

“Your after-action reports tends to make events seem deceptively simple. Due to the need to provide information to third parties, you provide clear turning points, easy distinctions - before and after, provocation and defence, killer and victim. The reality is almost never like that.”

He exhaled deeply, “I know.”

Hannibal's head leaned against his, both their thoughts turning inevitably to Elizabeta's situation, to their parts as abettors in this scheme of casting their daughter in the clear role of defender and victim. Will turned his head to press his nose into the shoulder of the luxuriously-thick woollen knit.

"Remembering and speaking about the reality of terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of social order and healing of the individual."

He wondered which specific unpleasantness was it that Hannibal wanted him to admit to; that their daughter had somehow inherited his predilection for murder, or that his husband had been drawn into the madness.

"Sounds like a bestseller."

The chest beneath his ears rumbled gently, but the alpha continued on, the unique timbre of his soft intimate whisper somehow making the words less clinical than they were, "The conflict between the will to deny what happened and the will to proclaim them is often considered the central dialectic to psychological trauma."

Will hummed in vague agreement.

In his time as an officer and then, as the guy who was called in the aftermath of a major arrest to perform what basically amounted to an audit, Will knew that survivors of serial killers often told their stories in a highly emotional, often contradictory and fragmented way that undermined their credibility. His interviewees always tried to fulfil two imperatives, each warring within them for control of the narrative. One advocated for truth, driven by justice and empathy; no one else should ever go through what they went through, never again. The other begged for secrecy, not sure if they'd be able to deal with others knowing all the terrible intimate details of their ordeal, how they'd thrown away their dignity in the pursuit of living just a little longer.

But that had nothing to do with their circumstances. Saturday night hadn't been the usual prosaic interactions between predator and prey.

"Truth is essential to recovery. Far too often secrecy prevails and the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom."

"I've always had bad dreams," he said, reflexively choosing to focus on the surface intent of Hannibal's words. In the silent expectation that followed his remark, Will found himself speaking again, awed and unnerved in turns by how the alpha could draw this out of him. "Sometimes, I can almost forgive myself...and then…and then I remember..."

He didn't finish, that familiar pressure squeezing and grabbing again at his chest.

Who was it that said having children was like having your heart walk around outside your body?

Kathy Prescott's face flashed through his mind. Some parenting book she'd read – Will darling, I don't know even know how you cope with four – she was already thinking about

the future, about ransacking Aaron's closet like a madwoman, trying to find where he hid the booze because she could smell it, that pungent sweetness, only to find a half-eaten apple fermenting into a soft brown pat in last year's school bag and sagging, foolish with relief.

Pulling back, Hannibal pressed a chaste kiss to the omega's brow, "One of the seats of emotion and memory is the amygdala. When something threatens your life, it kicks into overdrive, recording every last detail of the experience."

Meaning the more traumatic the experience, the more detailed and longer the memory. Well, wasn't that just wonderful, he smiled meanly. Will distantly wondered if Hannibal had learned this little tidbit when he'd read all those medical texts on the brain eighteen months ago, post-accident, or if he'd pick this up years ago, as a medical doctor or during his transfer to psychiatry.

He sighed heavily, "What am I going to do about Eli?"

"Who says that you need to do anything?"

The alpha returned the frosty regard with a wry half-smile.

"It's troubling, I know, to confront the possibility that you indirectly caused harm to your child. But Will, I think you'll find that often, you are more traumatised than the child."

"Is that your professional opinion?" He asked tiredly, not wanting to debate this anymore; too tired, his rich supper of homemade *casunziei di patate e ricotta forte* finally making itself known in a wave of sleepiness.

Hannibal sighed deeply and reached for his wine on the sideboard, "Call it experience. If it had been Tomas and not Eli who had experienced this with you, a very different response would be required; but in this case, a return to routine is what would be most helpful."

Will nodded slowly as he breathed in and out, trying to wrap his mind around the idea, trying to overcome his inner compulsion to fret and worry, and listen instead, trust in what the alpha was telling him. It felt simultaneously like the easiest thing in the world and the impossible.

Oh he knew there were already discussions about a trip to the zoo in the coming weeks, once Eli was no longer grounded, tentative plans of a shopping trip after lunch to get the seven-year old those new boots she'd need over the winter and new pants for Micah, a redux of the weekend gone awry. No need for an ivory tower here; Elizabeta's prescribed trauma intervention would involve quality family time, new things to challenge and preoccupy her, good memories to fill the spaces of her skull.

Stepping back out of the embrace, Will raked a hand through his hair to hide the yawn that he managed to stifle at the last second and reached for the tepid tea in a bid to stay up a little longer, instinctively dreading having to face his pillow. But somehow his husband picked up on it anyway, his sharp eagle eyes zeroing in on the creases at the edges of the omega's drooping eyes.

"I think perhaps bed is in order."

“Is that your professional opinion?” Will repeated, a touch of grim humor in his insouciant drawl.

Hannibal regarded him with a seriousness that belied the teasing glint in his gaze, “I’ve been told never to try to solve serious matters in the middle of the night.”

But what other time did they really have, between work and parenthood, he mentally sighed. Still, Hannibal was right. The omega took a desultory sip of the tea, and wished it was coffee instead.

“Thoreau or Dickens?”

“Close but no cigar,” Hannibal chuckled as he held out his hand for Will, “Phillip K. Dick.”

The omega’s eyebrows went up before they went down, because *of course* , of course it was Phillip K. Dick, he thought; because to his odd, *odd* alpha, Mister Phillip K. Dick and his electric sheep fit in perfectly with Sophocles, Boccaccio and Dostoevsky. Taking the offered hand, he let Hannibal lead him into the hallway and up the stairs to bed.

Beverly Katz has the reaction to Hannibal that the omega imagined most people did; like a traveller who had turned a corner in hope of something authentic and found themselves somewhere unexpected, a far cry from the well-documented vistas of travel guides and in the backstreets that were simultaneous more foreign and less exotic, but completely fascinating.

Taking another gulp of her beer, Beverly studied the contents of her almost-empty glass with a faint shake of her head before flashing the omega a mock-scowl. “I can’t believe he makes beer and you didn’t tell me.”

“I had a few other things on my mind.”

More than a few things, Will thought. He swallowed a good third of his wine, and shivered despite being wrapped in a thick sweater.

Having broken his alcoholic fast with a glass of wine that tasted of mulberries and moved quickly onto his second, the omega felt loose-limbed, his darker moods moderated by the presence of his colleague’s effervescence. Sharing the ability to find humor in bleakness, a trait shared by anyone who successfully worked with the dead, their conversation had been surprisingly easy, easier than he had thought it could be (she would thirty-eight in December, hated having a December birthday with a passion because let’s be honest, no one gave a rat’s ass about December birthdays - no, they were too busy recovering from Thanksgiving and putting in overtime and dealing with Christmas to give a shit; but hey, at least her parents always got her exactly what she wanted every year, and none of that pretending it was from Santa crap; that had gotten old by the time she was seven; yeah she’d been jaded, no wonder they got along) with the children’s antics being frequent points of conversation whenever

Junior dropped by arms held up imperiously for a hug or Micah crashed into Will's side screeching that Eli was hurting him, *Daddy*, stop her, *stop her*.

The forensic investigator observed the chaos with the amused calm of someone who had been through it all and lived to tell tales; as the eldest and an alpha among betas, Beverly had ruled her siblings with an iron fist - she'd never pulled her punches.

"It was like having my own grubby little stalkers, and I couldn't even take out a restraining order against them," she recalled with a huff of exasperation, truly fond and vehemently disgusted in that way only siblings could be. "Especially Dennis. He was a creepy little shit. Even now when I see him, all I can think about is the SM porn magazines under his bed - he was in fifth grade! No idea how he got them, probably from his best friend's creep of a brother, Chad Fulham. Did I tell you about Chad Fulham?"

Beverly cut herself off and tilted her head, brows creasing in confusion, the kind pause that happily tipsy people experienced when their thoughts were derailed and they were trying to remember something but it remained just out of reach. Frowning but evidently unable to make the mental connection despite her fierce hatred of Chad Fulham, she moved on.

"It was great blackmail material. Didn't take out the trash for three months. What about you?"

"Only child."

Beverly nodded sagely, "Explains so much."

He gave the woman a lazy scowl and took another sip of his wine, comfortable with letting silence rush in to fill the space between them.

"So, where's Tomas? I didn't say anything because you know, thirteen-year olds - but I thought he'd be here for dinner."

"Tomas is at a friend's. Group project. Deadline's next week."

"Ugh," Beverly made a face of disgust, "I hated group projects. They still do those?"

Will half-shrugged. School was a long-time ago now, but he assumed that most things were the same, except for flat-screen televisions everywhere and the kids having laptops.

"Dad."

He spun around.

Tomas hesitated in the doorway, dressed in a pair of jeans and his favorite blue coat, a backpack slung over one shoulder. His hair still had the slightly damp quality of having just been washed fifteen minutes ago and his fingers nervously flexed against his thigh, a twitch that he got when he was feeling uncertain. Will's attention zoomed in on the flicks of cut nails against denim until it seemed like it filled his whole vision, and along with it, everything that had happened this morning.

“I’m ready,” the boy said, taking in Will’s dishevelled hair with a carefully neutral expression.

A sudden flush of embarrassment shot through him. He knew what he looked like. A mess. The kind of omega that belonged to those horrible period dramas, stricken by some trauma and unable ever leave the estate, forced to wander its corridors and garden paths tended to by their alpha and relatives, forced each day to eat and dress. Of course, he hadn’t gotten to that part yet. He was still in the dishevelled and wandering part.

“Right.”

There was a heavy pause.

“Are you okay, dad?” Tomas asked; it’s a reluctant question, the air between them still thick with tension. “I called you from the door, like, five times, and you didn’t answer.”

Will winced because shit.

Shit.

The morning had started normally. They had been clearing the breakfast table while the younger children had gone outside to play. Will didn’t even remember what they’d been talking about before the conversation veered into dangerous territory without Hannibal there to modulate, the alpha having left after his morning coffee to visit a client in need. It had gone from rescheduling the boy’s cancelled sleepover to why nothing like this ever happened to other people, and swiftly moved into Will’s bad life choices as an omega and a parent; there was a reason that Tomas was always at Evan Garmendia’s house. It hadn’t quite gotten to shouting but had ended in resentful glares and frosty replies, and Will feeling as if he was drowning in the cascading emotions.

“Sorry,” he took a deep silent breath, the sickness he’d been carrying around with him since the weekend swelling inside his abdomen till it was almost physical agony. He smiled through it, not wanting the boy to think that he was still displeased about this morning and gestured for the boy to go on ahead. It’s not like he hadn’t already thought of everything Tomas had flung at him, but it had hurt to hear them said aloud.

His son looked past him to the laptop screen, his brow creasing in concern. “What are you doing?”

Will shut it. “Nothing. Just, some work stuff.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. He knew as soon as it came out of his mouth. Something fell across his son’s face before it was shuttered away under a genial non-expression. The same mask he’d wear when something mattered and no one was talking about it and he felt like he was going to suffocate to death, his imagination overtaking any attempts at sense.

“Tomas,” he began, but the boy was already gone.

In the car, the thirteen-year old omega stiffly stared ahead, both hands wrapped around the secure familiarity of his seat belt. There wouldn't be any point talking right now, Will realised with a sinking feeling. This much frustration meant no one would be thinking clearly.

Cease-and-desist, was what Hannibal called it.

Will got in but didn't start the car.

"You don't have to go, you know," he said gently, "I can call the school."

"It's fine."

Will felt his heart ache at the slight hitch in Tomas' breath.

"Are you sure?"

Tomas looked away to his window, though they weren't moving yet and there was nothing to see. It took a moment and two deep breaths for the boy to reply. "I don't want to sit around the house with you, dad. I mean, I get it, you know - sometimes, you just gotta be alone. And… I don't like it, when you're unhappy - I always feel it, even when I don't want to."

Will could tell that his son was holding back. That it took effort to hold back all the words that Tomas wanted to fling at him about how much he hated that this kind of shit kept happening to them - going to jail, someone trying to kill Papa, someone trying to kill Dad, again*. Woohoo.*

"Right."

"No offense," Tomas added softly. "And also, I don't want to fall behind on school…"

And that behind the fumes and bluster, he loved his omega father and was desperately worried. He was trying his best to not say things for the sake of being cruel, because that wasn't him, but sometimes, sometimes…

"Okay," Will reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder, wishing he could reach out and pull the boy into his arms but uncertain how that would be taken right now.

"You got everything?" He said instead.

Tomas nodded mutely.

"Pajamas?"

"Yeah."

"Toothbrush?"

"Yes," Tomas drawled, getting a little annoyed now.

"Slippers?"

His son gave him a look that said a multitude of things before turning to stare out the front. Will felt his mouth tug up at the corners, the emotional hurricane inside his rib cage calming back down to the dark clouds and rain. He was forgiven it seems, for now at least.

He started the car. "You bring your phone?"

This time Tomas did sigh, "Yes, dad."

"Just checking," he chuckled quietly, then turned serious, "If you're uncomfortable, if you get into a fight with Evan, if you want to come home, for any reason at all, it doesn't matter what time it is, you can call us, okay? Even if it's three in the morning, your father and I will-"

Tomas pressed his forehead to his omega father's shoulder and shuddered, nodding mutely. It's not resolved, not by a long shot but they have an understanding. It wasn't in either of their natures to say something hurtful just to wound.

Will slung his arm across the boy's back and squeezed. "You're safe, you know that right?" he whispered, and then on hunch, "Nothing's gonna happen to me."

Tomas said nothing.

"Hmm," the alpha inhaled deeply, getting up to see the source of the delicious smells wafting up from the bottom of the garden, "That smells fantastic, Doctor."

Hannibal looked up and smiled.

"Thank you, Miss Katz, but I'm afraid there's at least another half-hour left if you don't prefer your meat bloody. Did you enjoy the sausages?"

"They were great!" Actually, Beverly had demolished the cervelat then moved onto the biroldo (Will wasn't quite sure how exactly how it differed from the boudin noir except cosmetically) topping all that off with a Morteau that Hannibal had smoked only the day before yesterday. "I can't believe you made them yourself."

The alpha smiled, soaking up the compliment with an assumed humility that made Will want to kick him.

Dressed in one of his casual button-ups in steely navy and a plain black apron, Hannibal carefully massaged the rock salt into the slowly grilling meat, the heat keeping him cheerfully warm despite the autumn chill. Next to him, Micah twisted a small fist into his beloved Papa's apron, the other hand held behind his back, caught between fascination of the grill and fear of getting burned.

Set up in one corner of the paved entertaining area, the grill stuck out from the side of the brick oven/smoking closet like a pier. It had been a regular barbecue before Hannibal had updated it to have an adjustable grill grate and a brasero. The structure taken together looked like a miniature castle made of weathered red brick with its circular main body, the grill's wide base, the shingled roof and masonry chimney; the children knew they were not to play

with it, but it had still taken several dolls destroyed by soot and ash before Elizabeta had taken the rule to heart. Will's gaze turned to at the little girl who was sitting on the porch steps, gingerly chewing on her hot sausage while Junior mimicked her, bite for bite.

"What are you using?" Beverly inhaled gustily, clearly delighted to see the psychiatrist so out of his usual context. "Is it pine?"

"Grapevine. But very good, Miss Katz," Hannibal inclined his head, flirting back in that way he did, "They can have a similar aroma."

"Grapevine," Beverly repeated in a tone just this side of casual, catching Will's eye. "So, Argentine-style then?"

Hannibal's surprise to have his expectation of culinary ignorance upturned was almost as arrogant as his long-winded explanation of how he'd brewed the beer that Beverly was enjoying.

Surprise quickly turned into casual flirtation, "Have you been to Argentina, Miss Katz?"

"I might have," she grinned, "Backpacking trip after college. You?"

"My uncle kept an Argentinian cook. Everything I know about the fine art of roasting meat was taught to me by her, including the preference for grapevine."

Of course, *of course your uncle had an Argentinian cook*, Beverly Katz's smile said as she nodded politely, turning sideways to mouth something incredulous, snippy and definitely not suitable for tender young ears.

Will hid a laugh behind a sip of wine.

"She would grill for us every few weeks, the traditional way," Hannibal continued idly, "I never quite forgot the taste and was taught a very important lesson."

"What's that?"

"Having an Argentinian cook and not providing him or her with a grill would be a utter waste," Hannibal intoned, still sport-flirting outrageously.

Will chuckled under his breath and left the two alphas to it, his attention drifting to check on the children. They had been quiet for far too long to be a good thing.

Sitting contently on the porch steps below his sister, Junior freed his sausage of its skewer and was eating with single-minded determination, his chin well-decorated enough that he had to elbow Dee away from attempting to clean him up. Elizabeta snickered at the sight while Winston and Nap watched both children with a forlorn air, having long been trained out of begging.

Spreading his current handful of rock salt over the meat, Hannibal wiped his hands on a tea towel before selecting and skewering one of the last sausages on the grill. With a singular focus, Micah took the sausage with a bright greasy grin, leaning into his Pater's leg with

feline affection at having his loyalty rewarded. Over on the porch steps, Elizabeta straightened with a pout, somehow catching those few seconds of interaction despite not looking anywhere in that direction and completely miffed by the small show of favor - it was just a sausage, but it seemed that among siblings, a sausage was never just a sausage. She's not finished with hers though, so there's no point crying to Papa, but by the look on her face she was already planning her assault.

Maybe one day, he thought - *if they survive everything, if the FBI don't catch you* - she'll be a lawyer.

Beverly followed his gaze.

"Eli seems to be doing well."

Was she? Will smiled faintly. Good.

He hadn't tried to talk to her again, his palms sweating whenever he thought about it at breakfast, knowing that she was peering at him from under her lashes, passive-aggressively nibbling on her toast in clean, efficient lines of teeth marks before asking to be excused to go outside and play.

There's no chapter for this in the parenting manual.

Beverly snorted, "It's not in the How to be a Kid manual either."

"Maybe it ought to be."

"Considering what's on the news these days, you'd think."

He waited for her to ask whether or not they'll be seeking counselling - everyone else had asked, from Moses to the children's pediatrician when they'd visited him on Monday - but she didn't, just fiddled with her glass and drank another sip. Will took a deep silent breath and held it, the pleasant haze of the evening pierced by the sudden sobering reminder of why they were here at the cabin and not Baltimore.

Elizabeta's breathing quickened as she continued to comb the long mane of her favorite boy pony, belying the facade of calm she was trying to project.

"Is he dead?"

"We don't know."

Eli glared at the toy in her hand like she wished him ill, "I hope he's dead."

Will inhaled deeply and rubbed a weary hand over his forehead, "Eli…"

"Eli," Hannibal murmured, squeezing his arm around her shoulder in a mix of admonishment and positive reinforcement, "You know that's not a nice thing to say."

“Well he’s not nice!” She retorted at her Pater, her pretence at indifference evaporating under the strain of her true feelings. It rushed from her like a geiser, lighting up her eyes, reddening her cheeks, a psychic onslaught of confusion, mistrust and most of all, deep burning frustration. She snapped to face Will.

“I know he’s a bad man, daddy! I’m not stupid! He hurt Aunt Alana and he tried to kill you! And if he’s not dead then he’s going to come back - the bad guys, they always come back! Just like- just like- just like Voldemort!”

The cry pierced through Will’s solar plexus like a stiletto blade.

Blinking rapidly, the seven-year old’s little red face began to crumple, her anger, nothing but bluster, fear and confusion blown up in all sorts of shapes, trapped and rattling about in her small frame. Big silent tears squeezed out from the edges of her eyes. Hannibal made a soothing noise and reached for her. She struggled against it, all knees and elbows, too wounded to listen to the alpha’s placating words of comfort, too betrayed for cuddles.

The omega’s gaze flickered to where his daughter was. Having reached the end of her sausage, she took off the last chunk and held out the greasy skewer for the Basset Hound’s eager doggy kisses, giggling at the slobber between her fingers. She looked like she was having fun, like the happy seven-year old she should be and not the sullen child he’d been dealing with for the past few days. A rush of tenderness filled in the coolness that had fallen, hardening into the hot resoluteness of fierce protectiveness.

“She’s going back to school on Monday.”

“Is she ready for that?”

Will gave a half-shrug. The principal knew the vague details of what had happened and had already lined up appointments with their in-house counsellor. Hannibal thought that the children were more resilient than Will gave them credit for and that the week’s leave the paediatrician had signed off on was more than enough. Tomas was a hurdle for the coming weeks, to be tackled once Will had gained a little more traction. As for the youngest two, this entire week was basically a surprise holiday. Oh Micah knew something had happened. But he had woken up Sunday morning at the hotel and jumped into his parent’s bed, just like every other Sunday, so it couldn’t have been anything that important as far as he was concerned.

“It’s the beginning of the school year. We can’t just pull her out.”

Will drained his wine and put the glass down gently. Adjacent to him, Beverly Katz’s eyebrows twitched, her alpha instincts wanting to reach out and demand what was wrong. But they’re not that close.

Hannibal believed that talking about things could turn the experience from a negative one into an opportunity to learn, that by talking about what was going to happen next and how a criminal investigation worked, they could demystify the hours that Will spent away from home for Elizabeta as well as reinforce the instructions in place for emergency situations like this.

As if he would ever allow something this to happen again.

"You can lessen the risks of living but not eliminate them …"

"How was he found?"

She answered after a long beat, not needing him to explain what he meant, who he meant. Frankly she's surprised that he managed to hold off from asking for as long as he had.

"Washed up at Mockley Point," she replied, her tone vaguely amused; there was a certain poetic justice, wasn't there?

That was well downstream of Georgetown, past Alexandria even.

"Scared a couple of hikers. I wasn't in the team that picked him up, but I hear he'd been in the water a few days."

"Drowned?"

"Looks it, but won't know till the full autopsy."

Will nodded but quickly stopped, lightheaded as the information sank in. It's the perfect alibi, he realized; water in the lungs, what could be more simple and more effective? It's brilliance in its powerful association; everyone knew that water in the lungs must mean death by drowning. With Ingram being marked a serial killer, there would be no more effort expended upon his death by the FBI's forensic machinery, minor inconsistencies swept aside by the flabby indifference of redundant bureaucracy.

"Him taking a swim explains why we couldn't pick up his trail," Beverly muttered into the rim of her glass as she threw back the last of her beer, "Doesn't explain why he went swimming though."

Will knew why. It seemed obvious. With the bad weather, the river would have been very choppy, perfect for their purposes. Despite most of the Georgetown waterfront being overdeveloped public leisure hubs, no one sane would have been out at that hour in that weather. But the likelihood of witnesses or surveillance dropped to zero if one drove further north west to where the urban landscape pulled back from the river canal, leaving the area to cultivated wilderness. A good forensic countermeasure in a pinch; an even better way to dump a body that you wanted law enforcement to find and promptly write off.

Getting up with determination, Elizabeta dumped her dog-chewed splint of a skewer and greasy napkin down on the table in front of Daddy with a peevish glower and went to confront the little blond pest she had for a brother. Beverly Katz shot the omega a look of merry disbelief, having never seen the little girl in one of her bratty moods.

"Wow, you got a temper in that one."

His hand curled around the stem of the glass, a flash of sweat breaking out over his skin.

In the limited light, Will saw her eyes flicking to and fro, taking in the man lying among the wet mulch and mud, hunched in a little on himself, blurry face streaked with blood. She didn't look sorry, just startled, like someone who had woken up suddenly and found herself somewhere she didn't recognize.

"Eli," he croaked, reaching for her.

Watching her standing there, hair plastered to her slender neck, her bedraggled muddied poncho, washed by the steady rain, Will had a strange sense of foreboding that he'd seen something inside his daughter come out tonight, something immense, something explosive.

Elizabeta Lecter glared back over her shoulder when the youngest pest smacked into her, having somehow cottoned on to the unfairness of it all; Micah was the rightful owner of only one third of that sausage, even if Junior couldn't count properly yet much less understand the concept of division.

"Don't worry," Beverly assured him with a smirk, "She'll grow out of it. I did."

So Hannibal said:

"Unlike the majority of their beta peers," his husband had advised him, "alphas often presented various behavioral problems as children yet go on to be productive teenagers and enterprising young adults."

There were all sorts of studies why alpha kids differed, but he didn't need someone to tell him what he already knew. That all children could be cruel, their meaner instincts yet to be padded over by layers of subterfuge, dishonesty and social niceties that adults engaged in.

"Well mostly," Beverly amended, her eyes affixed upon the scene unfolding next to the grill.

Despite being besieged on both sides by childish bickering that quickly turned into a screaming chase involving all three dogs too that put the alpha squarely in the middle of the chaos, Hannibal took an idle sip of his wine and calmly, expertly flipped the meat with the trenching fork, the eye of the proverbial storm.

"Eli's always been lively."

"Yeah, my kind of girl," Beverly beamed.

Hannibal Junior, having neither the stride nor stamina to keep up with his older siblings, abandoned the cause and returned to Daddy's side, coughing as his little voice box complained about the howling workout they'd just received. Just this side of sleepy, the two-year old clambered up into the omega's lap with the familiarity of a seasoned mountaineer and glued himself to Will's front like a mollusc. The forensic investigator cocked an amused eyebrow at noticing herself the subject of a lengthy half-lidded study.

"Jack asked after you."

In an unofficial capacity or…?

Official, Will decided, reading the discomfort in the way that the forensic investigator tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“We think the Ripper’s back in town. So far we got two so...”

Let me guess...

“Jack’s worried that we've missed our window again.”

From the apologetic half-smile that she flashed him, the omega could tell that Beverly regretted bringing it up at all. But she didn’t need to ask for forgiveness. Will knew this for the warning that it was - and it was better to know than to show up at Quantico and be taken off-guard.

Her eyes flicked down to Junior. “He looks like he’s done.”

Will skimmed his nose through the top of the little boy’s hair and hummed in non-answer, scenting the child. He knew that Beverly expected him to excuse himself to put the child to bed, that the remark had been an opening for him to segue into an apologetic retreat but frankly, he didn’t want to move. No longer a baby, Junior didn’t hold still anymore when held, always writhing to be let down to run and jump, innate alpha instincts pushing him to be bold and sensory-seeking. Will knew he would miss this soon; they were growing so quickly.

“He probably tried to cross the river.”

The forensic investigator gave him a quizzical look. It’s to her credit that she picked up the threads of their previous conversation immediately.

“Law enforcement was looking for him - there were already weekend road checks, add in Halloween Saturday…” Will gestured to the side, letting the alpha arrive at her own conclusions, “No one's looking at the water.”

“Interesting…” Beverly’s face grew thoughtful, a teasing curve to her lips, “I’d ask you at this point why you’ve thought about how to escape from the authorities, but I’m pretty sure I know half a dozen ways too; it’s more or less in our job description, isn’t it?”

Will smiled feebly and looked away. Taking one breath and another, he ignored the treacherous spike of anxiety that punched him squarely in the chest, knocking the breath out of him.

As if he could sniff the turn in Will’s mood on the breeze, his alpha came up the stairs. “Would you care for some wine, Miss Katz? We have a lovely 2010 Château Lafon-Rochet to go with the meat.”

Will leaned into the hand on his nape, the familiar stroke of thumb and dextrous middle finger sending a pleasant tremor through his limbs.

“Bordeaux red,” He interjected softly, having seen that blank look on Beverly’s face before.

She flashed him a grateful glance.

“While that sounds lovely, I’m very happy with this beer.”

Hannibal conceded to the request with an incline of his head, his charm on full-power as he swept into the house, appearing shortly with a fresh beer in one hand and the decanted wine in the other. With a grin, Beverly held out her glass for a top-up - though only halfway since she had a drive ahead of her.

“So, Doctor, I wanted to get your opinion on something.”

His alpha made a hum of interest.

“River Plate or Boca Junior?”

Hannibal didn’t roll his eyes because that would be rude but the look of indulgent wryness he sent the omega might as well have been one, a very small one; Will knew the reference - he read the sports section sometimes - some annual soccer game covered by the American press in tones of wonder for the level of destruction and city-wide pandemonium they caused.

Stopping the flow of beer with a flick of his wrist, Hannibal replied with a rueful grin, “Miss Marta tried to teach me about the charms of football but I’m afraid to they were lost on me.”

“That’s a shame. You’re missing out.”

Hannibal chuckled, “I’m sure. Though I’m surprised to know you’re a fan, Miss Katz; soccer is an imported pastime.”

“Well, it started when I went to this club...”

His husband poured the wine to the exact invisible measure line of the glasses and listened politely as Beverly Katz recounted a friendly encounter in Buenos Aires that had started as a night of fierce drinking and ended with her waking up on a young couple’s couch and being dragged to the most insane sports event she’d ever attended in her life. She hadn’t known it at the time, but her new friends had paid over a thousand USD to get her a ticket on short notice, so dedicated were they to converting this poor deprived American girl to the glory that was their favorite soccer club. It had been an experience she’d never forgotten, and following the game broadcasts through the years had even inspired her to dust off her high school Spanish and develop it into a marketable job skill.

“Did you get up on your seat?” Will asked, sotto voce.

Beverly laughed. “Course.”

Using Junior as his excuse, the omega left them to it and went upstairs. It took longer than usual to wipe the boy down and get him into pajamas, the two-year old fighting sleep every step of the way till the last moment though he could barely hold his head upright. Coming down the stairs, Will checked his phone; there's a text from Tomas, his nightly check-in from Evan’s house.

By the time he returned, the conversation had moved on.

“Most people think they know what they're getting into when they decide to have kids but most of them don't have any idea,” Beverly’s saying as he hit the bottom of the stairs.

His stomach jerked and his muscles froze, uncertain of the direction that the conversation was heading. But then he heard Hannibal’s reply:

“I was never one for team sports - I dabbled in badminton and did a year of fencing, even tried a semester of Turkish oil wrestling in university,” mused the alpha, “but nothing ever stuck.”

“Turkish oil wrestling?” Their guest burst into incredulous laughter. “Doctor, you’re just full of surprises.”

Hannibal murmured something back, a stage whisper that set off another round of chuckles.

Will inhaled deeply and continued the rest of the way down the corridor and out onto the back porch. Hannibal’s eyes flew to his and crinkled slightly at the corners before flicking back down to the slab of barbecued beef that he was slicing with methodical efficiency with pauses every so often to drape several slices onto the waiting plates, decorated with roasted vegetables cut into all sorts of flora patterns and a downy bed of salad greens. Down in the garden, Eli and Micah finally came to a truce, out of breath and thirsty. They stumbled back to the porch, the dogs at their heels.

“What about you, Will?” Beverly Katz rolled her neck back to look at him.

Will sat down. “What about me?”

“You play a sport in school?”

God no. Team sports usually required membership fees, not to mention the equipment expenses. Dave Graham would have laughed in his face.

“I fished.”

“That’s not a sport,” Beverly scoffed, “Not when you’re a kid - you weren’t hauling hundred pound marlin fish in deep ocean.”

Will shrugged and took a sip of his wine. Having decided that the omega was being deliberately enigmatic, Beverly let the topic go and the conversation turned back to the food.

By the time everything from dinner was cleared away, kids put to bed, the grill cleaned and the dishwasher on, it was late enough that Will only had energy left to change and crawl into bed, shooting a courtesy message along the way to check that Beverly had arrived home

safely. Duty done and reply received, he's beginning to doze off when Hannibal got into bed, freshly-showered and no longer smelling like a fire pit. Will shifted to make room for his husband and smiled faintly as he felt the alpha nuzzled his neck in lazy affection. The alpha's hand draped itself across the spread of Will's clavicle, and he turned fully onto his side without speaking. They kissed gently and Hannibal moved towards him, over him, familiar with his body, the way they fit together, how to make Will's back arch in pleasure and his limbs quiver in exquisite tension. They made love with uncomplicated passion, mouths and caresses and a sweet quiet orgasm.

The sudden sensation of pleasure after days of numbness was shocking.

"Hi," he whispered with a breathless quality when Hannibal returned from the ensuite with a damp towel for the necessary cleanup, reading accurately that Will was in no state to get up and shower. He guessed that his flushed face must say it all because the alpha surveyed his supine form with a relish, evidently feeling very pleased to have short-circuited Will's modesty instilled a lifetime ago within the state lines of Louisiana and Mississippi.

When they finally got back into bed again appropriately attired, for the first time in many nights Will gravitated towards the alpha, sinking into the mattress with the comforting press of the man's chin against his shoulder and the secure weight of an arm curled over his chest.

Hannibal noticed her first, their midnight visitor.

"Eli," the alpha greeted, surprised.

Will felt the fog of sleep lift instantly as his senses snapped to attention.

"Eli," he gasped, pulling away from Hannibal to sit up in bed. For a brief second, he fretted; Eli never came into the bedroom during the night, not for bad dreams - no, that was always Micah - not even when she was sick. But then he remembered that the last thing his daughter needed was to deal with his worries. "Sweetpea, what's going on?"

Eyes flicking between her parents, the little girl seemed to momentarily shrink in the doorway at having realized she'd interrupted them cuddling, but then something came over her, bolstering her resolve. She straightened her back and pushed the door open all the way.

"Hi," she whispered meekly.

Even from a distance, he could feel the ache in her little heart. Will reached out for her and whispered, "Come here."

She came, flinging herself onto the bed and into his lap. Will wrapped his arms around her tightly and pressed his mouth to her hair, feeling something which had nagged at him for days finally disappear at the sensation of her in his arms. For a minute there's silence between them, peace after days of trying to talk, pushing and pulling and tossing and turning.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, young lady?"

"Couldn't sleep."

Pulling back, the little girl studied his face with a slightly guilty expression; she knew she was keeping him up late and that he hadn't been feeling well - her eyes drifted to Hannibal, wondering if she should seek out her Pater instead... Will kissed her forehead, possessiveness sweeping over him; this was *his* daughter, and he'd be the one who comforted her tonight, no one else.

"How do you feel about some hot chocolate?"

The little girl stared at him, faintly suspicious that this was somehow a test.

"Papa says caffeine stunts your growth, and refined sugar is bad after three o'clock," she recited primly.

Will laughed, the soft rasping sound less surprising than it had been earlier in the evening. He side-eyed his husband, who held up both hands palms up as if to say, 'Who? Moi?' with a broad smile, immune to being shamed for anything.

"Papa exaggerates," said Will, voice dry. "And he isn't getting any."

Getting the message that interference would have consequences, Hannibal waved with lofty amusement from the bed as omega and child disappeared for the kitchen.

Downstairs in the kitchen, under the critical gaze of his very own little hot chocolate aficionado, Will whisked jagged lumps of dark Swiss chocolate into the gently steaming milk, with appropriate accompaniments of cinnamon bark, cream and sugar, a tiny splash of French Vanilla essence and a spoon or two of cocoa powder. It's thick enough to tilt a spoon in by the time it's done, more sauce than drink, but Eli seemed satisfied that he'd made it properly.

"The secret is cinnamon and French vanilla bean essence," she informed him sagely as he fished out the cinnamon for disposal, then added with a completely serious expression, "And whipped cream to serve."

Wondering if he had somehow been duped into giving his seven-year old the ultimate teeth-rotting nightcap, Will took a tentative sip and found it fittingly appropriate for his husband's personal hot chocolate recipe; tantalizing to the nose, just this side of sweet, and dropdead delicious, creamier and richer than any drinking chocolate he'd ever had. Elizabeta took to her drink with less gusto than he had expected after the huffing and puffing over his shoulder at the stove to make sure he got it just right, her stare fixed on something that wasn't there.

"Did something wake you?"

Shaking her head, Eli spooned a bit of melting whipped cream into her mouth. "I wasn't asleep," she told him once she'd swallowed.

Sensing there was something she wasn't quite saying, Will reached out and ran his hand along the curve of her head, smiling wistfully when she leaned into it even as she licked her spoon clean. She had missed Daddy.

“After you finish your chocolate, we’ll go back upstairs and I’ll tuck you in, okay?”

“Do I get a story?”

Aged seven and already negotiating - if she didn’t go into law, she was probably going to go into business or government. Well, one hoped.

“What chapter are you on now?”

They were going through the New York Public Library’s 100 Great Children’s Books, something begun by Tomas who had been in the perfect age bracket of nine to fourteen years when the list came out. Though they had tried to convince Elizabeta that it might be a little advanced for her, she’d insisted. Last month, they’d begun reading ‘ *D’Aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths* ’ with her - which Hannibal had personally vetted and fully approved, having read the book himself as a child, and then later as a young adult with twelve-year old Chiyoh.

“Sisy-sisyp-” Elizabeta grimaced, swallowing the saliva in her mouth before trying again, a little pinch between her brows as she focused on saying the unfamiliar name correctly, “Sisyphus. I want to read the next chapter, it’s about Bellerophon.”

Murder, exile, monster slaying and hubris, Will silently took a deep breath, how lovely. Considering the fact that his husband was okay with the book as bedtime reading, it was no doubt appropriately censored.

“And if I read it with you, will you actually go to sleep?”

Mouth wrapped around her designated spoon, a long-stemmed thing she was obsessed with using even when she wasn’t eating dessert, Eli gave a guilty pause.

Pressing his lips together to hide his weary smile, Will pushed back from the table and patted his leg. With a skip and a hop and a clatter of her abandoned spoon, she was on him, her sharp little toes swinging into his calf muscles as she wriggled to find her spot, her weight heavy enough that he made a noise of discomfort. Soon perhaps, she would be too big to sit in Daddy’s lap, but until then… Will held her close and nuzzled her hair, pressing his lips to the crown of her little head.

“You wanna tell me why you can’t sleep tonight?”

Fidgeting, the seven year-old shrugged, her swinging feet curling in the chill without the protection of bunny slippers, abandoned when she’d crawled cross-legged onto her chair.

“We bought gerberas for Aunt Alana,” she blurted out, a topic that seemed random but which Will knew was not. Elizabeta had seen Beverly Katz twice today - first at the hospital, delivering those very same gerberas to Alana Bloom, and then again tonight at dinner, fitting in like a friend, like the way that Alana Bloom was a friend.

“Did she like them?”

Eli nodded, “Papa was going to get her the pink ones but I made him get the red ones too, cos they’re her favorite.”

Considering how careful his alpha was with the subtle messages that could be conveyed through flowers, the seven-year old must have used the full range of her wiles to force Hannibal to change his chosen bouquet arrangement. Nevertheless, that wasn't why Eli was telling him this; in fact, his daughter had no idea why she was telling him this, except that she wasn't sure about something that she *did* want to tell him, and was forced to talk to him about something else, at least until she could figure out and/or work up the courage to say what she really wanted to say. Will ran his hand down her back as he shifted back in the chair so that she could snuggle against him.

"I heard him talking to her, not Aunt Alana - the FBI lady, Beverly I mean," the little girl admitted suddenly, "I wasn't eavesdropping, it was an accident, the nurse was helping me put the flowers in water and papa didn't see me and…"

Will shushed her gently even as he closed his eyes to rock her a little, because well, damn. "It's okay, sweetpea, just, tell me what you heard."

Elizabeta took a deep breath, the sensation of her small ribcage expanding and contracting pushing against his stomach. "Is it true, daddy?" She asked haltingly, face turned downwards, "Is the bad man really dead?"

Was that what this was all about? Will inhaled slowly and deeply, making a soft noise of affirmation as he tucked his little girl under his chin, letting her hold onto him the way that he should have let her hold onto him from the moment they both woke on Sunday, exhausted and raw.

"Does that make you feel better?"

The seven-year old gave a small shrug.

"Did I kill him, daddy?"

Yes.

No. *No* , she had struck Ingram, true. She had injured Ingram, seriously injured even. But the decision of what to do with Ingram after that, the series of actions and inactions that led to the beta being pushed off into the Potomac and damned for sure, that *wasn't* on her. Petting her dark tresses, Will pressed his mouth to her cool dry forehead.

"No, honey, he drowned."

"He drowned?" Eli pulled back to look at him, her immediate response of puzzlement turning swiftly into a worried frown. "Did it rain a lot when I was asleep?"

Will stared for a beat and then began to chuckle, hit with a bittersweet relief at this display of childish naivety. Considering the wooded area Alana Bloom's house was situated - that was, nowhere in the vicinity of any water that Eli could immediately see with her own little eyes - he supposed that her seven-year old's imagination would link up the heavy rain over the weekend with 'drowning'.

“It did rain a lot,” he told her gently, “But that’s not why he drowned. He was trying to hide from the police, and decided to try swimming away from them.”

Eli nodded faintly, nonplus in that way children could be when given extra information she hadn’t asked for or cared about. “Am I still grounded?” She wanted to know instead.

Will nodded, and then at the sad twist of her mouth, hastened to add, “I’m not mad at you, sweetie, you know right? I’m upset, yes, because you - I know you were just trying to help me, but Eli, you could have been hurt, and- and-”

Tucked back under his chin, his daughter nodded. “I know, daddy,” she whispered, and then even more softly, “I’m sorry.”

Sucking in his first real breath in days, Will squeezed her to him, the terrible full force of his devotion to this tiny being wracking his limbs with something that might have been love but could have just as easily been terror.

“I’m sorry too,” he admitted hoarsely.

Breathing in her scent, a mix of vanilla body wash and sweat, and the raw berry sweetness of a prepubescent alpha, letting it calm him, Will was completely unprepared for the next question.

“Is that what happens in your nightmares?”

Will paused mid-breath, struck by a bolt of despair at the idea that his bad dreams was being talked about among the children; and he could guarantee it was being talked about, if Elizabeta was the one who had witnessed him in the grips of a night terror.

“You’re supposed to sleep when it’s bedtime, young lady.”

“I was asleep,” She protested, clearly alarmed to be called ‘young lady’ instead of the usual pet names; she was already grounded for an entire week, the last thing she needed was to have that extended just for asking a stupid question.

“I just got up for water,” she grumbled, on the verge of tears.

Sighing, Will shushed her, realizing that he’d made a grave mistake in wording. “I believe you, sweetheart, I’m sorry and...”

It’s with reluctance that he answered her, “Yes. Sometimes. But it’s not on you, okay?”

Pushing off to land nimbly on the small patch of floor between her omega father and the dining table, Elizabeta threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely. Will sighed as he ran a hand up her back and pressed his face into her narrow shoulder, glad that she finally understood why he’d been so upset at her even if he hadn’t meant to upset her with it.

“If you don’t drink your hot chocolate, it’s going to get cold,” he reminded her gently when she finally pulled back.

Her eyes were dry but there was a distinctively miserable slant to the pinch of her lips. Climbing back into her chair cross-legged, Elizabeta picked up her long-stemmed dessert spoon and scooped up a mouthful of the dark liquid with a gloomy expression, no longer quite in the mood for sweets anymore.

Will wrapped his hands around his own mug and took a small sip. “How do you feel about a visit to the Baxter’s stables on Saturday morning?”

Perplexed at this sudden turn of good fortune, Elizabeta cautiously turned to him. “Papa says I’m grounded,” she advised with a frown, clearly sceptical that this was a genuine offer and not just Daddy humoring her.

“I’ll talk to him,” smiled Will, and then at the immediate energizing effect of his words upon the seven-year old’s countenance and the ensuing struggle to hide just *how* excited she was at the prospect of early parole from her punishment, wryly added just in case Hannibal should put his foot down: “No promises.”

But that hardly mattered, not really.

Smiling down at her hot chocolate, Elizabeta took a long satisfying slurp and licked with relish at her chocolaty moustache, the pinch that had marred the slip of skin between her eyebrows finally smooth again. Tenderness swelled and pooled in the pit of Will’s stomach at the sight of her glowing countenance; had his or Hannibal’s moods ever been so mercurial as children or was this all her? Reaching out, the omega brushed a lock of unruly dark hair back over her narrow shoulder, dangerously close to falling into her mug.

“Did you know,” he said, “that Sisyphus was Bellerophon’s grandfather?”

Will pulled on his jacket and shut the car door, already uncertain if being here was a good idea. Despite the early hour, the academy grounds were filling up. Agents rotating through for additional training, trainees on their way to lectures and teaching staff hurrying to grab coffee before class, or fetch that file they forgot in the car. Footfalls on concrete, snatches of conversation, the groundskeeper whizzing by in his golf cart, damp earth, gunfire drills in the distance; all of the familiar noises he associated with the place, all of it ordinary, yet today they seemed magnified...

Thunderous.

He resisted the urge to press a hand against his chest, disturbed by his own rapid heart rate, the light glisten of sweat dampening his shirt, collecting in the dips of his clavicles. It was just his omega nervous system, which kept him in a state of flight for far longer than any beta and was triggered by everything from the trajectory of a ball about to hit his child to the minute flickers of expression on a stranger’s face.

It was the first time in days that he'd left the cabin, the first time he'd been without the company of Hannibal or one of the children.

Taking a deep breath, Will unslung his bag from the side mirror and kept his eyes down as he crossed the car park and went in. He took the stairs one level up then turned left to cross the gangway that connected to the Forensics building. There's an elevator waiting for him at the end of the walk. Will mentally braced himself and got on.

In the warped metal surface of the doors, he tracked the side-glances from faces he vaguely recognized or at least thought he did. The alphas, because they could smell him. The others, because they knew of him; or at least they thought they did. The local news station wouldn't have covered his part in the recent events but there was absolutely no doubt that Freddie Lounds had. Even at the Academy, she had her fans.

Getting off at his stop, Will exhaled only after the doors shut behind him. He turned into the third-floor laboratory. Close to empty at this hour, the three technician at their station look up but no one came to greet him. Going by their surprised faces no one even knew he was coming.

Will frowned down at his watch, his discomfort turning into irritation.

"Mister Graham."

The omega turned around.

Special Agent Edward Moses closed the distance between them at a brisk stride, one hand still resting upon his belted cellphone pouch. His tie seemed to be pulled tighter than it usually was - an attempt to draw attention away from the fact that his shirt was a day old.

"Sorry I'm late. I hope you haven't been waiting."

"You said you wanted a consult."

If the man was offended by Will's brusqueness, he hid his reaction well. "Yes. And unfortunately, the bodies were moved. This just happened last night so I wasn't notified."

Will found that hard to believe. The man was the current head of the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program of the BAU, he was practically the Pope when it came to do with anything involving the Chesapeake Ripper and the Bureau Butcher, even if Jack Crawford seemed to forget on occasion.

"How have you been holding up?"

He didn't sigh but it's a close call. "Fine. If we could get to it, I've got another appointment after."

"Of course," the beta nodded genially, as if this whole scenario hadn't been engineered for the sole purpose of giving the man a chance to speak to him without the filter of Hannibal's low opinion of the BAU, and led him past the elevators for the stairs.

“We’ve moved everything into the Basement.”

“The Basement,” Will echoed.

The basement of the building housing Forensics was a warren of offices and conference rooms mixed in with medical facilities, renovated from what had been a bomb shelter during the height of the Cold War. Windowless, dark and cold, the only thing it had going for it was the truly fantastic ventilation which allowed the ancient morgue down there to smell fresh as a daisy - apparently J.Edgar felt that being able to breathe was essential during the nuclear apocalypse - which was useful, when you intended to keep the corpses around for a week or so.

Made sense, he supposed.

It was the one place in the building with no teaching labs and therefore zero reasons for any young agent or trainee to find themselves in the vicinity, hoping for a look.

“How’s everything at home?” Moses tried again, acting as though this was a natural progression of the conversation. “I’ve been meaning to reach out - if there’s anything I can do...”

He knew the beta meant well but the less contact between Eli and the FBI right now the better. “We’re making do,” and then because it seemed the man would press, he added, “Hannibal has a colleague that he thinks might help.”

“Of course.”

Hannibal’s ‘colleague’ was a young pony named Leilani owned by the Baxters, who needed socialization with the short noisy members of humanity and Eli had been deemed the perfect candidate. She was supposed to be back at school today, but it just hadn’t felt right; Hannibal had explained the situation to the principal, who apparently was very understanding - they’d been through a shock, *of course* the omega would want to keep the child home for one more day of bonding.

Will wondered how much longer he would have to put up with this ‘friendly chat.’

“Do you have kids, Agent Moses?”

“I’ve got a son, Charlie - he’s eight.”

“Does he know what you do?”

“He lives with his mother.”

Ah. Right.

He was in the minority among the ranks of BAU consultants past and present, in more ways than one for being omega, having somehow avoided divorce and the requisite ensuing custody battle over children.

Realizing that this conversation was about to possibly wind up in sensitive territory, the beta fell silent for a minute to recalculate his mode of engagement. Will decided to put the man out of his misery.

“Ed,” he said tiredly, “If this is the opening to a long conversation at the end of which you’ll ask me if I’m quitting, no, I’m not and Eli is fine. So, please don’t waste my time. You can reassure Sanchez that there will be no need to involve Legal.”

Special Agent Moses was startled for several seconds by the quiet outburst before recovering, flashing the omega a wry smile, appreciative of the candour.

“Mary-Louise Whitney,” he said, changing the topic, “Fifty-eight. Patisserie chef. Owner of Whitney’s Bakes and Cakes.”

Will had heard that name before. Great pastries with a reputation for consistent quality but a bit pricy, according to Alana. Hannibal preferred the competition, Piedmont’s.

“Place shuts at four but she usually stays behind to close the registers, do the accounts and invoices. The cleaners come in at eight; they’re the ones who found her and called it in.”

“Organ removal?”

“Missing heart and lungs. Cuts, not stabs.”

Swiping his card for the double doors at the end of their winding descent, Moses gestured for him to go ahead. Will steadied his stance and pushed. On the other side of the heavy blast-proof doors, there’s a plain hallway, lit with the false cheer of hospitals and office buildings everywhere.

“And the second one?”

“Daniel Smith. Forty-three. Security guard. Worked Macy’s nightshift. Dismemberment followed by reassemblage. Ladies shoes manager found him in the backroom.”

“Reassemblage?”

Moses drew in an audible breath that said more than he probably meant to say.

The beta held open the second door in the corridor and nodded for Will to go on ahead. It’s dark inside but the motion sensor lights quickly zap on in response to their movements.

Metal counters greeted them, lined up neatly like coffins. Will’s brows furrowed at the four body bags, laid out randomly among the seven available counters, wondering which two he had an appointment with. One of them seemed to be sitting upright. Moses followed his gaze and gave an empty chuckle, indicating that yes, that one was for him.

“Since there’s no organs to examine, I’ve managed to push back the rest of the autopsy to keep the victim in his original condition.”

Which apparently was...upright.

Taking the pair of gloves handed to him, Will walked up to the oddly-lumped body bag and slowly unzipped it. An eyeball, milky with death, gazed out at him from the diagonally-sectioned top of Daniel Smith's shaved head. The omega's hands paused momentarily before unveiling the rest of the victim.

Calves. Arms. Neck. Feet. Whole pelvis. Body parts stacked atop each other like stones. A half-erect penis held in place by some kind of insert. The other half of the face, eye socket empty and unnaturally enlarged, tilted upwards on a cradle of palms and fingers dipped in some kind of hardening resin, mouth and teeth propped open by fixative and careful invisible stitching on the inside of the mouth. Will absently took the offered folder and opened it, glancing down before looking back up, staring. This wasn't a corpse. It was modern sculpture.

"It's kind of hard to look away from isn't it?

Daniel Smith had been transformed into a headstone-shaped sculpture of body parts cut in regular sections. This was only a temporary display. No attempt had been made at long-term preservation. Already the man's dark skin was being bleached of pigmentation. *More's the pity, he would have been gorgeous when he'd been fresh...* Will reached out carefully and ran a fingertip along the edge of the catching bowl that had once been a rib cage. Something gleamed a coppery sheen from between the two blocks of thigh placed inside the splayed chest cavity to act as load bearing foundations.

Will squinted at it, "What was in here?"

"Water, with traces of deer urine."

Will pulled back. The sensations of cold pooling in his chest and sliding down his oesophagus flittered through his mind momentarily.

"There was a pump in the chest cavity. We removed it for evidence but left the pipe in for structural integrity."

Structural integrity. Huh.

That must have been what he'd seen, that coppery glint.

Behind him, Moses' phone began to ring and the man excused himself to take it. The door swung slowly close on its hinges and thunked ominously as it shut.

Will walked around the meticulous construction, a frown creasing his features. This was the Ripper. There was contempt and humiliation in the mutilation and desecration of the body, and combined with surgical skills, knowledge of mortuary science, a sense of whimsy... Who else had the skills, patience and dare he say it, artistry, to pull something like this off.

So…that begged the question: why was he here, if there was no actual need for him to identify the victim as one of the Rippers? Perhaps Mary-Louise Whitney was the one they needed the consult on. Moses hadn't mentioned if there had been any window-dressing

besides the surgical removal of organs. Dropping the file on top of an empty gurney, Will went to the body bag one counter over and unzipped the bag.

Clark Ingram's cold dead face stared up at him.

Frozen in shock, Will stared back.

Behind him, the door creaked open.

The omega whirled around.

"When I saw it, I was tempted to call the Lindsay-Barclay Gallery and ask them if they're willing to put it in their catalogue."

Leaning against the door, Brian Zeller gave a lazy salute and joyless half-smile. "Rather ingenious; water flowed up the copper pipe and out from the nose, while another tube is inserted through privates and pumped water out right into the eye socket, into the oral cavity, down the throat pipes and into the chest."

Ingenious. That was one word for it. Another was be brutal.

"Mister Graham," Jimmy Price greeted with an affable nod as he swept in from behind the younger man, "I see you've met Mister Ingram."

That seemed to snap Zeller out of his ironic appreciation for the Ripper's macabre art. "Eh, sorry, but should you be looking at that?"

"How are the kids? How's the good doctor?"

It was Zeller's turn to look askance at the older beta, "Thought you didn't like kids."

Price shot his young colleague a dirty look. No one seemed to mind that there were four corpses in the room, one of them broken up in pieces for arts and crafts. There wasn't much in the way of human depravity these two hadn't seen. It took something outrageous to make a noticeable dent in their emotional status quo and evidently, Daniel Smith didn't quite make the cut.

"I'm fond of Doctor Lecter's children," the man corrected, "I'm not particularly fond of hypothetical children."

Will heard the banter from a distance, unable to quite tear himself away from glancing down at the beta who had starred so heavily in his mental life of late. The corpse stared blindly up at the ceiling, facial muscles slack beneath the unhealed cuts and bruises. Average height, average build, and pleasant unmemorable features; dull brown eyes, thin chapped lips, asymmetrical nose, hair groomed in a regular professional cut - short.

A pale imitation of the monster...

No, this wasn't the monster. This was just the monster's mask.

Walking to the filing cabinet in the corner, Price returned with a folder. “Photos and complete autopsy.”

Somewhere between annoyed and resigned, Brian Zeller threw his hands up in the air because hell, when did things like protocol ever matter anyway.

Will reached for it only for the man to pull back. Jimmy Price’s lighthearted gaze was brimming with sympathy; the beta had been the bystander to a crime once upon a time, one of the experiences that had pushed him to where he was now (and just what was it about small towns and communities that bred such insanity) and he knew exactly what would make the omega sleep better; so they’re not friends, but he was more than willing to turn the other way.

“Ten minutes in return for the coffee.”

“Twenty,” Will countered, pulling from his shoulder bag both the thermos and a small takeaway box bearing a familiar scalene triangle logo. “Madeleines from Piedmont’s.”

The latent prints expert took the box with an appreciative ohhh, delighted.

Brian Zeller’s disapproval at his colleague’s betrayal wavered slightly; dammit, he was a sucker for Piedmont’s - living southward of Quantico meant that he usually had little reason to go north to Baltimore. Trying his earnest best to not give into his colleague’s improper conduct, he crossed his arms and renewed his glare, even if his ‘glare’ sometimes strayed unwillingly to the waxed cake box.

Price decided to aim for knock-out, thrusting the Piedmont box at his uncooperative young friend.

“Fifty-fifty,” offered the older beta almost arrogantly.

“Sixty,” countered Zeller with a grimace of disgust at his own weak will.

Jimmy Price agreed by snagging the younger man by the elbow and dragging him towards the door. Hey, it was one thing to crack jokes over corpses, it was quite another to eat standing over them.

“You better not be Freddie Lounds in a really good CIA mask,” Zeller threatened, still wavering over the bargain he'd struck; protocol aside, this was personal for the omega, and getting personal was never a good idea.

Price tightened his grip on the elbow, “Thank you for the coffee, Will. Enjoy.”

Zeller squirmed uncomfortably, muttering one last parting warning, “I will not hesitate to throw you under the bus if this comes back to bite us on the ass,” before the door shut heavily on him and his accusing eyebrows.

In the sudden silence, Will glanced back at the corpse. Clark Ingram’s eyes stared blankly up.

Taking a deep breath as a tremor coursed through his body, Will watched. Watched for that first flutter of life. That first drop of color. Red followed by black, blood and dirt. Then the chalky grey pallor of strain, the first shudder of breath returning to those coagulated lungs. These developments were followed by color; pigmentation, a flush; a line of dark bloody red drawn by an invisible hand across a creased forehead.

Forcing down his apprehensions, the omega took a step back, and then another and another, until he was as far away as he could get from the table without leaving the room.

The tiles disappeared first, dissolving into the walls which folded back in on themselves to reveal a gaping darkness, then the furniture went too, sinking into the quicksands of the void while the lights sputtered and fought on until finally they surrendered too, leaving him alone in the cold dark with nothing but the sound of his own breaths to keep him company.

Then, in the quiet, he felt it. A tiny droplet of water on his forehead. Then another, and another, until it's cascading down over him, cold and bitter.

Will stepped forward and immediately fell over onto his knees into the freezing mud with a pained cry, startled as the wounds and injuries returned, blood blooming under his skin.

On the muddy ground, Clark Ingram made a noise and began to get up on his knees.

Raising the rock again, her face twisted by anger, Elizabeta slammed it into the beta's skull again, then again, and then once more and again, until the beta lay there quietly in the mud. Face blank and lips tight from cold, she stepped back, a stumbling wavering step, as if whatever mania had driven her just moments ago was finally spent. The bloodied rock hit the ground with a sodden thump.

Elizabeta's eyes flicking to and fro, taking in the man lying among the wet mulch and mud, hunched in a little on himself, blurry face streaked with blood. She didn't look sorry, just startled, like someone who had woken up suddenly and found herself somewhere she didn't recognize.

"Eli," he croaked, reaching for her.

Watching her standing there, hair plastered to her slender neck, her bedraggled muddied poncho washed clean by the steady rain, Will had a strange sense of foreboding that he'd seen something inside his daughter come out tonight, something immense, something explosive.

"Eli," he tried again, "Sweetheart?"

The girl looked over to him, eyes wide with feelings she didn't yet have words for. "Daddy?" She said, her brows furrowed with anxiety, "Is he dead?"

Not quite, but he will be, his spectre promised, high on bloodlust with rationality nowhere on the horizon, *somehow - just you wait, sweetpea, I'll make it happen.*

Though, Will suspected that he wouldn't need to wait very long.

He flinched as he recalled the heavy full thunk of the stone slamming into Ingram's skull with every bit of strength and weight that his daughter could muster. Except Elizabeta was no ordinary seven-year old, he inhaled deeply, the consequences of her actions washing over him.

The FBI were coming, *were almost here* , and there was a dying man on the ground, a killer who had been surprised by his daughter, an *alpha* .

Since her dynamic had been confirmed, it had been expected that Elizabeta would take an interest in the physical arts - the *fight, the hunt and the conquest, alphas were born for these*, the saying went. But alphas who were discovered to be aberrants - whose desire to kill and stalk and conquer were too strong to be civil - were nipped quickly and swiftly in the bud. Alpha children with juvie records, with a history of antisocial behavior, with *incidents* in their childhood - the youths covered in case studies, those rare alphas who plotted to rid their fellow alpha siblings due to perceived favoritism or delusion, who bullied the other children in playgrounds, who drowned animals and forced their playmates to eat dirt and locked them in cages meant for dogs, who changed the medications of their grandparents and siblings for 'fun'.

The worst case scenarios unfolded before his eyes in a hot flash, coalescing into a certainty that one way or another, this entire night would bring upon him the unwanted attention of the FBI, that Crawford's roving eye would pin him down.

I'll tell them I did it - self-defence.

Will felt the panic gushing out from the pit of his stomach and paralyzing all his limbs recede under the steady invasion of his flesh by his own inner monster. A coldness settled over him, clearing away the blur of his vision, smoothing out the skipping track of his imagination. He was a forensics expert, certified as an expert witness whose opinion hefted considerable weight in court, even if Lounds liked to preach otherwise; and he could and would wipe away every trace of his daughter's involvement - he was a serial killer hiding within the FBI, evidence tampering was undoubtedly within his repertoire.

In the back of his mind, the gears began to turn.

There was a noise, a slurping crunch-crunch coming in fast from just beyond the drenched red maple understory. Ignoring his aching muscles, Will rolled over onto his knees and snatched up the bloodied rock, prepared for anything. The sight of torch-glare sent a chill down Will's spine. Too soon. *Dammit.* It was too soon for the FBI, and the last thing he needed right now was a witness.

Eli spun to face the intruder and backed away, eyes wide and feet apart, instinctively trying to shield Daddy.

"Will! Elizabeta!"

Hannibal appeared, stepping out from behind a tree with the abruptness of a magic trick, eyes flicking to and fro, his mouth a tight worried line. Will sank back down on the wet leaf-strewn ground, the rock tumbling from his hand.

“Papa!” cried Elizabeta, rushing forward to embrace her Pater.

The alpha opened his arms and scooped her up with the protective fierceness of a parent who had feared all to be lost. “Elizabeta, *mon ange*, papa is sorry for being late,” breathed the alpha, frantically looking between his little girl and his omega, “Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?”

The phone’s torch light swung to cover him, blinding him with its glare. Will answered his alpha’s silent panicked plea with a shake of his head. He was bruised, and his left ear was ringing but nothing else; it was the adrenaline he knew, keeping him from feeling the full extent of the injuries.

Relieved, Hannibal turned back to their daughter.

The girl squeezed Papa for one last drawn-out second before letting go, “I’m fine, papa,” she said urgently, her voice a lilting tremble but surprisingly composed considering the circumstances, “But I think daddy’s hurt, and I think the man’s dead.”

Straightening, Hannibal took in the scene.

Will held his breath, wondering what his husband saw. If he saw what Will saw.

On the ground, soaked to the skin and beyond, Clark Ingram shifted, one hand groping uselessly at the ground, seeking traction. It’s not clear if the beta was aware, or if the movements were the last instruction sent by a brain rattled offline by the blunt force trauma of a cantaloupe-sized stone being slammed against it. Will watched the beta with veiled contempt and felt a zing of shock as he recognized the same expression on his daughter’s sweet face as she peered out from behind Hannibal.

Walking closer with the caution of someone versed in the unpredictability of the wounded, Hannibal came to stand by the beta’s outstretched form, studying the pattern of wounds under the illumination of his phone. Will’s stomach dropped as he took in the extent of the damage. Attacks from behind were almost always cross-examined extensively before any consideration of self-defence due to the direction of the blows. With Jack Crawford already certain there was something wrong in this picture Will had built for himself, there was no guarantees that the FBI would just write all of this off.

His husband crouched down and cautiously felt for the beta’s pulse.

Hannibal checked his wristwatch.

Alive then, Will exhaled.

Their eyes met over the soon-to-be corpse, something unspoken passing between them. Will glanced away, wretched.

“Eli,” he heard himself say, “Aunt Alana’s injured back at the house.”

“Yes…?”

“She’s all alone and probably scared, could you go and keep her company until the ambulance arrives?”

The little girl nodded slowly, still uncertain.

“You have to do what we practiced, okay? Do you remember? Can you repeat it back to me?”

At this order, Elizabeta nodded more eagerly, “Close all the doors and windows, turn on all the lights, and get a phone and call 911, and give them you or papa’s phone number so they can call you if you’re not there. And in case you don’t answer, give them Irene or Marie’s phone number, and if we have to, ask to speak to the FBI, because daddy works for them.”

“That’s right, *ma chouchoutte*,” chuckled Hannibal, reaching up to stroke a hand across her wet cheek. “Now, go do as your father says.”

With one last look to confirm the safety of her parents, the seven-year old turned to run back to the house. Hannibal shone his light after her until she disappeared from sight. A moment later, the porch lights peeking through the trees flickered on and off, Eli’s way to let them know she was there.

“This man needs medical care,” said the alpha as soon as their daughter was confirmed to be safely out of earshot.

Will studied his husband’s reserved expression.

“Prognosis?”

“It’s a traumatic brain injury, Will,” Hannibal glared at him, sending a pang of guilt through him, “I couldn’t possibly say without an MRI scan, and in any case, my surgical expertise in trauma did not extend to the brain.”

He bit the inside of his mouth. How upset Hannibal was regarding what had happened tonight with Eli, he’d have to deal with later.

“Your professional opinion.”

Hannibal tilted his head, a curious look creeping over his face, almost as if he was just realizing what it was that lay at his feet, “If he doesn’t see a neurosurgeon within the next hour...his chances of mortality are guaranteed. The attack was... precise.”

The dozen or so plans, half-formed and still nebulous, shifted and coalesced into ten, and then nine, and then six, as he quickly brushed through one possibility and another based on the new information and his own extensive forensic knowledge.

“He was going to kill me...” He said, trying on the words, trying to believe in the best, wanting Hannibal to agree because - *because if the FBI knew what had happened tonight, quicker than you could say therapy, Elizabeta would be whisked away.*

If he couldn’t get you as a patient, Chilton might settle for her instead, are you going to let that happen?

No, he breathed, **never**.

“It was self-defence,” Hannibal agreed softly, the rest of his sentence unspoken.

It had been self-defense, up to a point. But beyond that point…

Will swallowed down the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him, because no, no, not now.

Taking in the entirety of the prone form with a critical eye, something akin to grim satisfaction flashed across his husband’s stoic features in a symphony of micro-expressions. “She killed him with four blows,” he said softly, almost as if surprised.

“He’s not dead yet,” Will said, an edge of hysterical laughter entering his voice as he realized that Hannibal *wasn’t* horrified but lofty, removed in that alpha superiority expressed so brutally by their daughter.

“You’re glad she killed him,” he realized, with growing dissonance.

“What would be the alternative?” The alpha leveled him with an arch look, “That he have killed you? That Elizabeta be lying there instead?”

The images struck him in the solar plexus, producing a hot terrible flush of emotion. Will clenched his muddy aching hands, wringing them together, feeling the sting of scratches on his palms, the broken skin of his knuckles. One of his thumbs was numb. He wondered if it was broken. It wouldn’t be strange since he had a bad thumb, didn’t he? Broke it once as a kid helping the old man with a job. What had happened again? He hadn’t let go and gotten it jammed in something.

Hannibal turned back to studying the unconscious beta. “Do you have your forensics kit in the car?”

Will nodded, taken off guard by the question.

“We need to dispose of the body,” the alpha said.

Will stared at his husband in frozen incomprehension.

Yes. *Yes, that is an option*, muttered his shadow, *wasn’t what I would have attempted, but it’s completely possible with Hannibal here.*

“You have a history, Will,” the alpha continued, an ilk of persuasion in his voice, “That history is going to be on Eli when the FBI investigates this. She’ll be known as the daughter of the man who *thinks about killing people for a living*. Do you want that upon her?”

All his anxieties, real and imagined, flashed through his mind. His fears of being looked at, being set apart, that his disguise would come undone, rose up and tugged at his throat.

“What happened was self defence.”

“Most would agree,” Hannibal said, “There would still be those who will link Elizabeta to you.”

Freddie Lounds, neither of them said.

Tears pricked his eyes as the bleak possibilities tore through his mind, each image of Elizabeta’s future more harrowing than the last; the isolation, the loneliness, the brain-numbing medications; that their gamble be found out and his secrets outed, the children taken as wards of the state, Hannibal’s reputation destroyed in the ensuing media maelstrom; the end of their lives together as a family.

The alpha stared at him intensely, eyes glittering almost snake-like in the diffused light of rain-drenched LED torchlight, before leaning towards him with a sigh, arms outstretched to shelter, to comfort, to lend strength. Will closed his eyes as he tucked his head beneath the alpha’s chin, trying to find the scent of Hannibal but only finding the after echoes of expensive cologne, damp wool and rain. For a minute, he stayed there, letting his aching body rest against the solidity of Hannibal.

“Will, we have to act now,” murmured the alpha, his voice so low that it almost disappeared beneath the pitter patter of rain.

The omega inhaled deeply of the damp, his dread transformed into a surreal calm as his shadow rushed to fill the gaps, propping up his aching limbs, his weak flesh.

“There’s access to the river nearby,” he heard himself say.

“You should return to the house, stay with Elizabeta, deal with the authorities when they arrive.” Hannibal steered him towards the light through the trees. Will stared at the man and didn’t budge, letting his hand drop to the side. Overheard, there was a flash of lightning, followed seconds later by a crack of thunder.

“They’ll ask me for a reconstruction…” he said cautiously, trying to understand if his husband knew what he had just proposed; Hannibal had a certain level of forensic knowledge as a trained medical doctor but… “They’ll want to know where Ingram escaped to, they’ll want to know about what he intended to do.”

There was no need to clarify who *‘they’* were.

Hannibal’s hand griped the back of his neck, a gentle securing hold that forced Will to hold his gaze. His determined steely gaze.

Your husband, he knows more than he’s telling you… You should be careful, Mister Graham.

“I knew he was going to hurt daddy,” She said as soon as he had turned off the engine, having found parking directly in front of their destination. She turned, holding his gaze with a verve

that would be unnerving to most but which he found breathlessly intriguing. “I went to the house and saw Aunt Alana. She was on the floor and she wasn’t moving.”

Holding that alien gaze, seemingly too great for such a small form, he leaned in, hungry for insight. “How did it make you feel?”

“Angry,” she admitted and then at a whisper, still young enough that shame over her natural instincts was still an ill-fitting suit, the indoctrination of the docile masses having not yet taken hold; “I’m not supposed to be angry, am I?”

He considered his answer carefully, regarding the girl’s conflicted state with shocking tenderness. It should not surprise him, the ability of these creatures to elicit emotions from him; family values may have declined over the last century, but even the most tasteless individuals with the unfortunate fate to enter his field of vision still endeavored to do their best for their families. He knew the binding contract he had entered into bringing these tiny humans into the world, accepting the possibility of joylessness, anarchy, and disillusionment for the chance at incandescence and immortality.

“Anger is an energizing emotion; it makes us take action. When you’re angry, you’re optimistic that you can do something about what’s happening.”

She turned those inquisitive eyes upon him, blue pools that reflected the cold, cold depths of his mate’s hidden self. “Do you get angry, papa?”

“Of course, *choupette,*” He smiled easily, and then in a conspiratory whisper, “Everyone gets angry.”

“Even daddy?” She frowned at him, her beautiful visage rumpled by the ugly emotion of doubt.

“Your father too.” He assured her, then deciding that they had been in front of the ice cream shop for long enough to possibly arouse unwanted curiosity, got out of the car and went around to let her out. She got out gracefully, as befitting his progeny, and patted down her thick winter’s dress to ensure her modesty.

“According to Aristotle, that’s the easy part,” He said as he took her hand, “To be angry with the right person and to the right degree, and at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way; that’s very hard.”

She mulled over the words, head bowed as she allowed him to lead her around the vehicle, over the muddy gutter and onto the sidewalk.

“Will I get better?” She asked as they alighted the front steps of the store.

“Naturally,” He said with all confidence. “Though next time, if you really need to hurt someone, wait until you're big enough to handle it. Or better, find someone to do it for you.”

She didn’t understand what he was saying, not completely, but that was fine; they had many, many years ahead of them, and he could be patient; there was time to sow, time to water and

tend and till. There would be a harvest one day; one day, all in due time.

They walked into the ice cream parlour together, the bell hung over the door jingling merrily to announce them. With a smile, he ordered for the two of them at the counter; pumpkin and peanut butter pretzel for her, French vanilla for him. By the time they took their seats in the booth furthest from the service counter, the girl's face was no longer flushed at all, the emotional outburst of earlier a distant memory.

"What would you have done?" She wondered aloud.

He took a deep breath and pondered it; he *had* fantasized about what he could have inflicted upon the beta for daring to attempt what he had, but perhaps it had been for the best that he hadn't been involved. The experience had proved to be an important impetus for growth.

"I'm not sure you'll find it helpful," He told her, "Papa's much bigger than you."

"What do you think I should have done?" She revised, wanting to know, to understand this event that had caused such a ruckus.

He took a deep breath and pretended to think about the question, familiar enough with the psychology of his children to know that keeping his second-born in a state of anticipation and impatience would guarantee that she would remember every word, every inflection. And in time, with comprehension and context, having kept this piece of hard-won advice close to her heart, would grow into it.

He graced her with a fond smile, chucking her under the chin, "*Vous ne régnerez sur ce monde qu'en devenant invisible, choupette*."

She mouthed the enigmatic phrase silently back to herself, intent on asking her older brother about it when she next saw him, and more determined than ever to learn her French.

If she had meant to say something else, it's cut off when their orders were brought to the table by one of the two elder women who ran the entire establishment in the slow hours from morning to early afternoon.

"I don't expect you to feel bad or regret what you did," He picked up his spoon, glad to see that the establishment had kept to proper cutlery as opposed to rough unpalatable plastic, "But you need understand that it's considered bad form to take pleasure in hurting others."

The girl dug her spoon viciously into her treat, delightfully uncowed.

"Even when they're bad people."

"Unfortunately." He smiled, finding something so oddly charming about the child's distaste; she reminded him more than ever of a small tiger cub, gnawing on a tree stump, not quite understanding yet that urge to chase and bite and rip but somehow inherently aware that this was important and required every effort. "Even when they are bad people."

"Even when they deserve it?" She queried, her disgust with the moral quandary moving now into genuine distress that people could be so stupid.

He chuckled, refreshed by such forthrightness. While not one to be swept away by flimsy dreams of the future above all the sensual details of the present, he allowed himself to entertain the fantasy of the creature that might spring forth out of the small slip of a girl before him. Was that a horn he could see? Or was that the sharp tip of a fang?

“I’m going to tell you a secret,” he whispered.

The drop in volume had the desired effect. She leaned in across the table, eager to be entrusted with something hush-hush, to get that boost of being special. It’s unintentional, but he supposed that with the long gap between her and her elder brother, his emotional investment in the latter relationship might appear disproportionate to her. There’s no need for such jostling though. She was her own being, his and theirs, a peace-offering and living sacrifice, sired upon his beloved and bestowed back to him magnified.

“Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good,” He whispered, and then sitting back upright, resumed speaking at a normal volume, “But people don't like to talk about that.”

And neither should you.

Sucking her spoon clean, she frowned, “Why not?”

“Because,” He smiled as he finally dipped the steel spoon into the frozen dessert, “It’s considered a form of gloating. And gloating is rude.”

While his sweet-tooth was not as keen as hers, it nevertheless rose to the occasion. It helped that the ice cream was of exceptional quality. Not to mention, he was in an immensely good mood, a melliferous contentment that seemed to demand he generously share it, which always made everything better. He let the first mouthful with all its bracing cool and sharpness of flavor transport him, to summer days in Brittany, to the sticky heat of New Orleans, before circling all the way back here, to this small ice cream parlor in Virginia, with his child, an untapped powder keg of potential.

“No one likes a braggart, Eli.”

Chapter End Notes

So the French is - The only way you can rule the world is to become invisible, my pumpkin.
Hi. So guess what?? It was hard but I somehow managed to write while teaching. It's still a big problem for me, flipping my brain from academic writing to fiction writing, but ah I'll get there. A big thanks to eclectic for random help and the title
Anyway I hope you all enjoyed this installation. I worked hard on it.
My last chapter was meh to me - I didn't write it in my best form, and the writing was a little uneven. So this long 18k chapter was me fulfilling my own standards.
Truthfully, I cut out quite a bit from this chapter, cos I ran out of steam to power through some hallucination scenes. I'm not good at writing horror it seems... *sigh*

Thank you for everyone’s comments, even if I don’t respond to them all, I’m so happy when people enjoy the story :) so please if you can let me know

Barbaresco

Chapter Summary

Are you observing or participating?
Aka
What Bedelia Du Maurier saw VS What Will Graham did

Chapter Notes

Hi all I'm doing better so I picked up the fic again. This long break was ridiculously long cos I was ridiculously unwell. I said a long time ago I don't abandon fics. I meant it.

Edit 29Jul - so I changed a medical term - from intercostal which is more appreciate for rib cage to symphysis which is actually correct, I kept expecting someone to call me out on using the wrong medical term but I guess no one was a med student or they were kind enough to ignore me when I published while still awaiting medical fact-check

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: 13 January 2003

"Will hates *Madame Bovary*. He was so offended that he was tempted to burn my copy in the fireplace."

Did he, she wanted to ask, *did he burn it?*

Bedelia Du Maurier studied the alpha's smile from across her sitting room, paying particular attention to the adoration in that usually limp gaze. For two sessions now, she had seen Lecter display a myriad of emotions, so she was no longer taken off guard. But it was curious that Will Graham's lapse in manners was *cute* rather than improper. She took a mouthful of wine and held it over her tongue, trying to decontaminate the smoky aftertaste of veal that clung to her soft tissues.

"I knew it wouldn't be to his taste," he confided with a smirk, "Will saw the dress-rehearsal of an opera adaptation when he was seven and reacted poorly; I recognised the plot immediately when he described it."

Besides feeding, grooming and flaunting his inamorato during the past three weeks, the young alpha had steadily invaded Will Graham's mind and body, sexual intimacy being merely a means to conquer the former. Tormenting the young man's psyche had also apparently been on the agenda.

"Seven seems a young age to be cultivating such interests."

Even a dress-rehearsal was priced out of the Graham family's means, if the given information were accurate.

"It was a school excursion. Will was temporarily placed in care after the death of his grandmother until his father could fetch him. The social worker thought to enroll him at an elementary school with a separate class for omegas."

She imagined it would have been a small class, a maximum of eight but more likely five pupils of various ages and Will Graham had probably been the youngest; home-schooling omega children until middle school or later was still the norm in the south among the lineaged.

Another outline was added to the sketch she had of the young man; once a grieving omega child with no stable parental figure tossed into what passed for omega-oriented education in 1980s America. God bless, *truly*.

She had to suppress a snort. Young Will had been forced to sit through an opera performance that impressed upon him the self-deception of salvation in love and the often selfish, fickle and recklessness of human nature, helpless to do anything except swallow what he had been fed. At least the other omega children had parents they could seek out after this farce for comfort.

She could reasonably guess what he focused on as an omega and a child - the protagonist, because she was unavoidable, and the daughter of the protagonist, because she was powerless. An essay she dimly recalled reading during her bachelors came to mind, a review of commentary by omega authors on various classics, to show the difference in mindset; that omegas saw the themes and meanings and then some, but agonized over side characters as much as the protagonist, hyper focused on the vulnerable and real world consequences. The daughter's absence for most of the show despite carrying the impact of others' decisions probably compounded young Will's terror at his lack of agency and the lack of available adults who gave a damn.

"He loathed her even as he sympathized with her against his own rational judgment," and it charmed Hannibal that at age seven, the omega was affected to the point of anguish without knowing anything, not the name of the production nor context and not a word of Italian.

It was barely better than abuse; well-intentioned beta educators unable to provide the requisite mental and emotional aftercare yet exposing very young minds to complex moral concerns and themes, thinking it'll mean nothing to their charges, just some beautiful gibberish singing to some gorgeous dramatic music. Though Will was probably the only one haunted seventeen or so years later, she could confidently surmise his classmates were also upset that day, even if not so violently as to leave a stain on their psyche. Institutional

blindness to how fundamentally different omega children were to their beta counterparts was well-documented; the state school system tried but continued to misconstrue omega children as simply *sensitive* uncanny versions of beta offspring.

“He never saw the ending. Claimed a bathroom emergency and left to avoid it.”

Because young Will had already predicted the bleak outcome and wanted to avoid the miserable epilogue sinking its teeth into him.

She observed Hannibal’s little inhale as his eyes drifted out of focus, his smile indulgent. It wasn’t clear if he was enjoying the omega’s trauma or the hefty trust expressed in divulging what was clearly still an unsettling memory. It would be better if it was more of the latter. She suspected it was more the former.

“Will lives in a state of fear.”

She felt a tug of distaste at her polite smile, wondering if he could see or hear himself; he was practically *chirpy*.

“And that troubles you?”

He noted the correction. It took a moment to find a passable response.

“It’s the price of his imagination; to take away his fear requires taking away how he sees the world, what makes him unique,” said Hannibal, loving in his quiet reverence, “I couldn’t do that to him.”

She wondered what the omega’s wounded psyche smelled like to her colleague’s finely-tuned nose.

“It can’t be comfortable, being powerless in the face of his pain.”

“Why do you consider it painful?”

Bedelia Du Maurier smiled as one does at something uncivilized. Yes, how forgetful of her.

“I meant for him.”

“I know what you meant.”

Well then.

She picked up her neglected glass of wine and drank deeply to douse the bonfire in her mouth. Opposite, Hannibal sampled his wine with the usual finesse.

When at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again…

“Fear is stress, stress is damaging.”

One corner of Hannibal Lecter's mouth tugged up even as the rest of his face went into contemplative repose. He heard her, and heard the censure behind the words but he'd do what he wants anyway while pretending to comply.

He knew the academic literature as well as anyone in their profession; that the conduct expected of alphas and omegas were not merely leftovers of bygone eras turned into cultural norms and codified law, but a mutualistic relationship of immeasurable benefits - medically, socially, psychologically, sexually. Naturally, the most well-adjusted alphas were the ones who had been brought up in traditional families, even better with an omega sibling so they could start young in learning to be protectors. It was a sign of maturity in an alpha to secure an omega mate and keep them content and by their side. There were *studies*, *statistics* about salary averages, lifespan expectations, life satisfaction - between alpha males versus alpha females, either married or unmarried, with progeny versus without. The performance ratio was *always* in favor of an alpha, male or female, mated with an omega and had at least one child with the aforementioned omega; these alphas were the most successful and healthiest, long-lived, psychologically sound and sexually satiated.

Her nostrils flared, the only hint at irritation she allowed through her professional decorum; Lecter accepted the research, couldn't deny it as a rational being and trained medical professional. He was just arrogant enough to consider himself immune.

She stared down those chiseled features, akin to the still surface of a very deep dark pool and wondered what lay beyond. Suddenly, a smile broke over that crooked mouth.

"Like me, Will has found ways to relieve the pressure."

She felt her irritation flare at both whatever had Hannibal so entertained and his intent to manipulate her by dangling that knowledge out of reach. A faint suspicion came to mind but she dismissed it.

"Will is a survivor."

"So you've said; it's one of the traits you admire about him."

"I do."

This was an easy connection to make; her colleague had also survived a difficult childhood. The familiarity and affinity that the alpha experienced with Will Graham was probably this similar difference in their childhood in comparison to their peers - but somehow it seemed too easy a conclusion.

"Surviving trauma requires adaptation. Yours was a sacrifice of authenticity."

"Are you calling me a liar?" He asked, still bemused, "Or do you still think I'm confused?"

He was definitely a liar and possessed less self-awareness than he thought he had. Fortunately he had just enough self-awareness to know he needed some form of guidance, which was where she came in; his lighthouse until he could find his way ashore and into good Will's orbit.

“I remain concerned about your infatuation.”

“That I am harboring ulterior motives.”

Did it even need to be said?

“That your attraction is pathological… and what you’re attracted to is also pathological.”

Her gentle admonishment drew a roguish grin from the man. He took a sip of wine, mouth lingering over the lip of the glass as he considered the weight of her assertion.

“More interested in the madness than the man?”

It wasn’t like he was subtle; he was salivating over the omega’s abnormal empathy like a starving lion.

“Traumatic experiences leave scars. What did they leave Will?”

There was another ponderous pause. She felt a sense of benevolence towards the omega simply for how he made Hannibal Lecter cast about for words, rummaging inside himself like any other experiencing a desire to connect. Not that their conversations were like any of her other patients, whether about life or love.

“He was safe, but he didn’t know he was safe. He also knew he was different but didn’t know how or why, until his grandmother died and he was forced to interact with the wider world on his own.”

Bedelia Du Maurier had few dealings with that side of society but there was an intersection between their profession and the law enforcement and social services arms of the government. It was also a widely accepted unfortunate fact of life that the United States was generally terrible for beta-born omegas, even if laws and policies tried.

“He’s always been safe; he knows now that he possessed *aegis* from birth - but he didn’t know that as a child. Even presently, having benefited educationally financially and otherwise from his social value, he still struggles to comprehend it and remains disconnected from it. He was brought up as any other child by his beta grandmother and then beta father - *vulnerable*, like any other child,” Lecter met her concerned gaze, a razor twist to his smile; “What happened to Jimmy or Jenny down the street could happen to him.”

And deeply aware Will Graham had mummified his child self, strangling himself to protect himself from acknowledging what he gleaned between the smiles and mundane routines of life; stunted, interacting with the world from behind his poorly-applied bandages henceforth. Now Hannibal Lecter intended to peel him open, layer by layer.

It was up in the air as to what drove this urge to divest - redemption or inquisition or something else entirely - but she could finally understand this sudden and intense infatuation. Hannibal Lecter had found someone seemingly tailor-made; maladjusted omega with poor self-image, congenitally high levels of sensitivity warped into a defensive tool instead of

nurturing instincts, manifesting as the ability to connect with anyone, even the pathological: *pure* empathy.

Unique.

Someone who shouldn't be alive.

An ambitious endeavor.

She crossed her legs and shifted in her seat, unbalanced by her own urges, a primal pulse of interest.

"Do you feel protective of him?"

"I am."

A hopeful starting point, though his definition of what protectiveness *actually* looked like in-action would need work.

"Unfortunately he firmly believes he was never mistreated."

Damaged self-defence? Lowered self-preservation? Denial? Disassociation? Dissonance? Beachhead -– easier? She scribbled her notes down without looking.

"You believe otherwise."

Hannibal glanced at the notebook open on her armrest. She had to quell the urge to cover the page despite him being too far away to make out anything legible.

"He had a safe childhood, *nothing* happened to him," Dark eyes met hers once more, brimming with tender scorn; "But he was not safe from himself; he couldn't blind his eyes or block his ears. He saw and heard and inferred many things."

In short, Will Graham, never touched by an unkind hand - no, the CPS would have whisked an omega child away in a heartbeat if they suspected anything - was abandoned to the darker inclinations of adults and peers, who violated him daily in passing with their thoughts and intentions. It didn't matter what they ended up doing, that they chose to be moral, lawful and kind with regularity - what they *wanted* to do and *did do within their minds* or did *secretly* out of view were as real to Will Graham as anything that had taste, texture or smell.

"Threat of violence is coercion, prolonged coercion erodes one's sense of safety and agency."

Hannibal Lecter's smile had a shade of rueful fondness, but his eyes glittered. As much as she would like to believe that his desire for insight into his omega's psyche was derived from a protective instinct, she also knew her young colleague well enough to remain rational in her estimation.

"He's safe with me," Hannibal told her.

There's no emphasis anywhere in the words spoken, a flat statement. But she heard it anyway, his impudence.

"Good," she smiled, "Keep it that way."

It was as much as she could do. By all signs he was going in the right direction, actively reading and discussing the books she had recommended to steer him towards *virtuously* wooing his target. His willingness to *try* was evidence of his attachment, in whatever capacity he was able to be attached to the omega and about as much as could be expected considering. On the quota allowed to alphas before they were classed as antisocial and dangerous, he came in at the very top.

Lecter didn't know about the evaluation she had done of him, and if she had her way, *never* would; it was completely unofficial and would remain undocumented, for her perusal only. His interactions with Will Graham, even gleaned secondhand, would one day be of great therapeutic value. She already had almost enough on Hannibal to write a book; now that he was *in love*, the book just became a trilogy.

"I miss him."

She felt a rare moment of levity. The metaphorical drooling was hard to miss.

"I don't even mind if he wants to burn half my collection."

Bedelia Du Maurier blinked; that didn't sound like a joke even if Lecter was grinning like it was. Not sure why she felt a vague unease, she checked her wristwatch surreptitiously. They had gone over-time.

"When are you flying down?"

"Right after our usual standing appointment - which I hope to still attend."

So soon? And a Thursday night flight? Her amusement grew along with her itch to be a fly on that wall.

"A lot is going on right now so naturally, our appointment will go ahead unless you say otherwise," and she wanted to keep abreast of the situation, which seemed to be unfolding at an uncontrollable pace. "In practical terms however, have you made arrangements with your patients?"

"Of course, it would be unprofessional otherwise."

She nodded in approval.

"Though select patients have been informed of the reason behind my unusual schedule and quite approve," smirked Lecter.

Alpha patients, no doubt. She ignored her urge to remind the younger man once more to share as little private information as possible with patients. Out of everything he could have shared, knowledge of his courtship efforts were innocuous; all alphas would court at one time

or another and everyone would eventually be informed about the courtship's conclusion via a notice in *The Gregarius*.

"It's good that things are progressing well…" she shut her notebook, "Happy hunting, Hannibal."

Lecter tipped his head magnanimously, "Thank you."

Baltimore City was the same when they arrived back after the time away at the cabin. Even what they did together remained the same and where he slept remained the same; he still kept to his guest room on the second floor and Hannibal kept to his bedroom on the top floor. He didn't know how he should feel when the first night of his remaining four sleeps in Baltimore saw him being ushered upstairs into his own bed.

Part of him was relieved, another was confused, and one more part missed sleeping in a bed with someone else, though technically he had been *passed out* in a bed with someone else, *not* asleep.

Hannibal had told him that; just because he was unconscious, it didn't mean he was asleep - one needed the entire cycle of brain waves to play out their symphony arrangements to get the benefits of true restful sleep - and Will's ongoing general fatigue was probably because he was mostly falling into unconsciousness, not drifting off into restful restoration.

But he didn't get up to find the alpha. He remained in his own bed and stared at the ceiling until he became unconscious.

The next morning they had a late breakfast and then went out together to a gallery or museum or a long walk somewhere with some trees or some water and then returned for early dinner, because the sky was dark by five anyway and Will still wasn't quite used to the weather even with all the layers on. Then after dinner they would sit in the lounge (as the study wasn't ready, Hannibal had lamented more than once, because *yes*, that's what was missing from the trip, a home study with a wraparound library) reading in comfortable silences with some conversation here and there. It's sedated, very old-fashioned but it's kind of nice.

Hannibal didn't watch TV because when he was the age to develop those habits, television was an instrument of the State and therefore ignored, and then he was too busy acclimating to France to have more than a passing interest and then he went to medical school. Will got anxiety watching it because even in a comedy sitcom he would often realize that things weren't as funny as they were framing it, and it could easily be a drama at moments or even a tragedy if they swapped out the bright colors and canned laughs. And the American cop shows that were so popular… this world was dreadful enough, he didn't want to see it as entertainment. It *wasn't* entertaining to him.

So they had this apathy in common, which meant evenings like this; fireplace, books, ample drinking.

“What are you reading?” He had to ask because Hannibal was reading a paperback for once.

The alpha lifted the book up so he could see the spine and front cover. Will raised his eyebrows and let out a snort of aborted chuckles, because it was a romance novel.

“I’m doing research,” the man said with a completely straight face, and then because he was blunt like that, “Going to make fun of my reading option for the evening?”

“Oh *no*, in terms of story structure and use of human psychology, those books are masterful.”

He even meant what he said.

“Yes, quite manipulative,” Hannibal smiled down at the book in hand, like he was looking at a piece of kitchen equipment that he’s never seen before but was thinking about the uses of - because it had to be useful or no one would put it on the market.

“So what’s your conclusion?”

“Poorly written Austen imitation; the characterisations are quite shallow.”

“You’ve read Austen?”

The alpha shrugged, “I’m willing to give anything a chance.”

Anything? Will had the sudden urge to test this someday - and was surprised when he noticed he was thinking about a *someday*.

“I don’t usually read in English unless it’s for work,” continued the alpha who thumbed through the paperback idly, “but I was recommended to do so by my psychiatrist.”

Seemed like a weird self-care/enrichment activity recommendation but alright, whatever floats the boat.

“Your psychiatrist gives you reading lists.”

Not only that, Hannibal Lecter saw a psychiatrist. But that might be condition of keeping a license to practice if one didn’t belong to a clinic; everyone was supposed to check in with each other and would discuss patients at a clinic in regular meetings but Hannibal worked alone and for himself.

“While the human condition is universal, the American psyche is still sometimes foreign to me,” from the way that the man was staring at him, he got the weird feeling that the American psyche being spoken of was *his* psyche, “Sometimes this allows me insight when shared cultural norms blind other therapists to the manifestations, and other times I am left bewildered.”

“You, *bewildered*?”

Hannibal gestured casually, “You bewilder me all the time.”

Will ducked his head to avoid the alpha’s suggestive smile.

“She thought it would help me with the courtship expectations.”

Will returned to his own book, delaying his discomfort by running a hand over the page; he was reading the *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Hannibal had a lot of books on all sorts of subjects in all manner of genres but he had a clear bias towards French and Italian titles, often owning both a copy in the original language of publication and an English translation. The only ones he noticed missing from the stacks that Hannibal had - nothing shelved because the study wasn’t ready yet was it - was Russian. He had French, English and even a Japanese language copy of Dostoevsky’s works but no Russian.

Hannibal had read Austen to see for himself what the English-speaking population were basing their preconceptions regarding courtship upon.

Well, this was awkward. Will had not read them.

In some vague childhood memories floating around like so much flotsam in his head, he knew there was a Lawrence Olivier movie and he knew the storyline, so he could probably bluff his way through a conversation but he’d never read any of them and wasn’t planning to.

Something must have shown on his face because Hannibal said; “You’ve never read them.”

Will shrugged and reached for his tumbler of whisky, refusing to feel chagrin over his piece-meal education in things that omegas were supposed to like; “The course was an elective, I went with dystopia - felt more applicable.”

Hannibal tilted his head, amused by the admission or maybe the manner of admission. Then shutting the book in his hands, he lobbed it gently into the fireplace.

Will blinked. He stared at his host, surprised and yet not sure why he was. His impression of Hannibal had gone through a shift since seeing the alpha in his usual habitat; the man was a little weird, beyond just being foreign because of his European background.

“That’s probably fifteen dollars.”

“Overpriced,” decreed Hannibal, already casually sipping his wine.

Will hid his laugh, his first truly genuine laugh since...*everything and all the things*. The slimy dross of uncertainty that clung and *clung* despite how restful his Baltimore stay had been even with the hormonal interruption seemed to peel back the way the paperback pages curled under the fiery assault, which gleefully swallowed up the gift it received out of the blue.

“I said I wanted to burn it but I didn’t actually do it.”

Burning books seemed very… Bonfire of the Vanities and called to mind Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Basically it was uncivilised behaviour and he wouldn’t do it even if he sometimes

wanted to.

The man smiled, “I thought it was an apt response. It’s one thing to burn a book because you don’t want anyone else to read it, it’s quite another if it’s your own property, you have read it and it upsets you.”

Will took a sip of his whisky to hide his smile; Hannibal Lecter was going to be a bad influence on him.

“What were you studying in high school?”

Hannibal had read the standard curriculum of Victor Hugo, Proust, Voltaire, Moiliere and others. He mentioned in particular the *Romance of Tristan and Isolde* - but it’s another miss because Will had never been interested in romance epics. He didn’t say it, would never say it unless the man brought it up first but it’s in the back of his mind to wonder if Hannibal had liked his aunt-in-law more than he was supposed to; and in a corner of his mind, he also wondered how he appeared next to the omegas from Hannibal’s little world, this subculture where people still cared about family trees, bemoaned the state of arts education and everyone had either two degrees or a very high-level of skill in something esoteric that required a seven-year apprenticeship.

They continued this conversation sporadically over the evening and then the following days, talking circles around novels, essays, morality, the history of ideas or food; Will found out why almost all French wine bottled from the nineteenth century on could be considered half-American; they visit Lexington Market and Hannibal bought spices while relaying anecdotes about his travels in Turkey, with the highlight being Constantinople; Will listened and resisted the urge to tell him to use Istanbul because Constantinople had changed her name five hundred years ago.

Then it’s the last day. He was returning to New Orleans tomorrow. To his room in the attic and his desk at the precinct with nothing but a lot of busy work ahead - because they thought he still needed the down time to recover, and because no one else was willing to take Will as a partner. If anything ever happened to Will on a case, they wouldn’t know what to do… it might even hamper their career prospects, getting an omega killed in the line of duty. It was one thing if you were a veteran and had a track record to fall back on when something went south, but not at their level.

“How was it growing up with your father?” Hannibal asked that last evening, “Must have been lonely.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Statistically and anecdotally, omegas grow up best when surrounded by a communal network of family and friends,” Hannibal monotoned, his eyes barely more than a dark slit as his face was shadowed by the reading lamp he had on behind his head, “You only had your father and you traveled with him due to the seasonal nature of his work. It must have been hard, and I presume, lonely.”

Will swallowed thickly and fumbled for his wine, regretting a little that this conversation was happening the day before he left and therefore he couldn't drink something harder. They had talked a little about childhoods prior to the New Years but that had been the nicer stuff, the Christmases and summer vacations. Hannibal had done most of the talking and he had been more than happy to listen. Now it seemed the tables had turned.

"Tell me about it."

What was there to say - they were poor, and his earliest memories were with his grandmama who looked after him until she died of a stroke. Will couldn't wake her up one morning and that was that.

A peaceful end.

She had left her shell behind and gone off to be with the Lord.

Will didn't have much in the way of emotions to those memories. He remembered and didn't remember, like he was watching the projection of his own years on a scratchy film roll but without nostalgic music. The first time he realized he was different from the children living on the cul de sac where his grandmama lived as a widow was when Lisa next door told on him; a girl he didn't know had walked up to him at the park and kissed him.

He had pushed her off and run away because *yuck*. It seemed the end of it, but it obviously wasn't the end because his grandmama stopped him going to the park with everyone else after hearing about it.

"That must have seemed terribly unfair, to be punished for something you had no control over."

"She was just over-protective," he deflected.

It had felt horribly unfair at the time and he'd probably been upset, it wasn't clear but he remembered napping on the couch and waking to his grandmama whispering about him on the porch with her best friend, Miss Faye, worried she wouldn't know what to do one day when he got older and how was she, an old woman, going to handle that. It had scared him a little, because why was getting older a bad thing - how was it going to be anything other than being taller and bigger and having all your teeth in place. He had wondered briefly for a moment if he was going to die, before deciding that was ridiculous; people didn't come with a biological clock like that, not so suddenly like switching something off or on.

The irony.

He understood now in hindsight that the little girl had probably been an alpha, and that considering the neighborhood, she probably had beta parents and been trying to figure out why he was different to her senses, instinctually following an urge to show him affection or something when she just rushed up to embrace him. He hadn't sensed anything different about her but it happened so abruptly that he probably went into shock before he could notice it.

He ignored the alpha asking about his grandmama because there really wasn't much to say. She had seen him through diapers and toddling. She had passed away one morning and then he was at a stranger's house and then he was at a new school and then they took him to that dreadful play.

Which, Hannibal already knew about and - seriously, the alpha was a dick for not warning him when he picked up that book for his reading that evening.

"No relatives?"

How would he know? He didn't even end up attending grandmama's funeral. *Maybe* Hannibal could tell him all about his relatives.

"The list would be too long. We would be here all night."

Right, he was flying tomorrow, and Hannibal had a skin-covered book/manuscript in storage with his family tree stretching back to pre-Catholic Lithuania.

The alpha had relatives spread all over Europe, some closer, some more distant and some distant enough now to fall back into the dating pool without any incest involved; had to hand it to them, keeping a set of recessive chromosomes from dying out was hard work.

"My father used to dangle me upside down and pretend to throw me off the portcullis battlements. My mother was always horrified and yelled at him until he stopped."

There had been an old man who came by their house, gray, wrinkled with a big nose and extremely tall. Grandmama hadn't been certain about him at first but soon became friendly, and Will figured out eventually that the man was an officer of a nearby precinct and an alpha. His name had begun with a Sch sound - maybe Scholz or Schumacher or Schaefer. He had lifted Will up high and let him sit on his shoulders so he could touch the glass of the ceiling light. After that he came by a few times more, but then grandmama died and Will moved to a new area with some strangers for a week and a bit before his father came.

"How was it, seeing him again?"

He saw him infrequently enough that he was not close but frequently enough that he found his presence a relief.

The drive to where his father lived took a long time, so long that the cassette playing Hendrix had been repeated several times despite the radio being switched on whenever they got a signal. The first thing that Will did upon getting out for a toilet trip was vomit milk and cheerios everywhere. His father led him to the bathroom, waited for him to do his business, used the gas station hose to clean him off and fed him a few sips of cola that burned. He didn't eat for the rest of the day until evening when they arrived in Biloxi.

His father gave him a mug and a bottle of lemonade and showed him a loaf of bread, mayonnaise and boiled eggs still sitting in the pot, stone cold. Will made a sandwich while his father went to shower. It's not very good. No it was dreadful; he had salt but no pepper and the bread was slightly stale.

His father ate the same thing when he finished his shower but washed his meal down with beer. Will showered and went to bed. Or rather a foam mattress covered in blankets on the floor, next to his father's bed.

Will woke up in the middle of the night still hungry but there's nothing in the fridge but mayonnaise, beer, margarine, lemonade and cola and bread. He ate a piece of bread dripping in mayonnaise to stop it feeling so dry and gritty in his mouth then went back to sleep.

It did get better. There was fruit in the fridge the next day. They also moved within a week and there's a large bed in the new place so he slept curled up on the far left, an entire valley between him and his father.

School was school. Then it was his birthday and then winter and he got food poisoning. His father fed him boiled pasta and packet chicken noodle soup and kept him bundled in blankets. He survived but was weak and listless for months.

His father drank a lot sometimes and didn't drink at all other times, and there were times when he was certain that he would wake up one day and the man would be dead.

He was late to class once or twice because the man was hungover but never often enough to affect his attendance. He started using a simple alarm clock with a battery. He hid a lot in the local library, read books he probably had no business reading, crouched between the high shelves keeping him blanketed from view. He made a friend, then moved. He made a friend, she's very funny and he stayed at her house and then she moved. He made another friend and this one came with an entire two-story house containing four-post beds with lace bed curtains and entire trunks of toys and a little sister and two parents who were both doctors. They took him ice skating for the first time. Then his friend started to dislike him; the little sister whispered it's because she likes him but has become a huge snob and thought he was too poor to be her friend.

The five-year old didn't use the words "white trash" but he heard it anyway.

He went to a private middle school, because the nearest public school said they couldn't accommodate him. The middle school principal was concerned that Will didn't attend school in uniform and wanted to talk to his father. It was expensive - a shirt might be only forty dollars but he needed a whole outfit; a tie, pants, suit jacket, a sweater and more then one shirt and the right shoes and a *fucking hat*.

Don't even get him started on the sports uniform.

It's from this that he learned there was a grant he could get on top of the scholarship to attend classes, which could be used for the uniform purchase and his expenses in the cafeteria. And then he did the same for high school and then escaped to college, where some alpha-omega family who probably once called Saratoga their home parcels out money from beyond the grave to pay for his tuition, his books, his dormitory and three meals a day.

He escaped to the Police Academy. He escaped to New Orleans.

And now he was planning an escape to Baltimore, Maryland, where he would be able to finally thank that dead Saratoga family for their contributions to keeping him alive till he could pass on his recessive chromosomes.

“What’s this?”

Bedelia Du Maurier hid her surprise at the cream envelope on the low side table, it had a luxurious texture and was scented too - a flutter of tart peach, dark florals and cedar wood.

He unbuttoned his suit jacket, practically flopping back into the armchair with feline lassitude, “It’s for you.”

Starting with deliberate obtuseness today. Very good.

Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier was scrawled across the front in crisp maroon calligraphy, a tightly controlled series of loops and angles, notated with three sharp blots of ink.

“So it is,” then ignored the urging of politeness to pick it up and open it.

There was a moment of friendly contention as they each smiled at the other across the Tabriz rug of her office.

“You canceled your last appointment.”

“I did. Something came up.”

His reticent replies dangled in front of her like a lure.

She allowed a moment of what may be faintly *parental* exasperation that the younger alpha persisted in these little provocations. She had more years on him as both an alpha and a psychiatrist to see enough of him to see the truth of him, but she supposed she’d let him have his fun.

“Nothing serious I hope.”

“No, it was nothing of concern,” He smiled brightly, like a young person of middling thirties for once instead of an ageless being attired in human skin.

“It’s been nice to see you excited about something. You so rarely are.”

“Is that so?”

That grin disappeared so quickly that she felt a chill. It was reapplied just as swiftly, making her stare; this really was a genuine expression of excitement. There was just a lag between

the input and output, she realized, but then the emotions were probably being translated first before presentation so one had to be understanding.

“Yes, you look happy.”

Will Graham must have done something very interesting indeed to get the man’s blood so riled.

Freely in her own mind, she confessed to dark enjoyment of the young alpha’s wistful pining, bemused by those long descriptions of what the omega had done, had said, had thought he had hidden. These conversations were finally somewhat like actual therapy, instead of whatever mockery of it the alpha had previously engaged in for the sake of a rubber stamp; having his more suspect behaviors corrected by an alpha of respectable background was just an added perk of their conversations previously and not the goal. It did double her workload, having to translate whatever flowery obfuscation he was monologuing at her to figure out what *actually* has been happening, over what he *said* was going on or *thought* had happened. She felt a little invigorated to be honest, the task of shepherding Lecter as challenging as it’s been rewarding, perhaps veering even into the territory of self-satisfaction to have finally talked this peculiar young colleague of hers into progress in his personal life, which had been - let’s be very frank here - prior to the entrance of good Will, a very shallow desolate landscape of dinner party set pieces and curated outings to participate in community without sincerity, and the occasional self-serving sexual encounter.

“How’s Will?” She asked, because it was her duty of care at this point, and no doubt the source of his recent seemingly unceasing joy.

Lecter’s reply was to stare at the envelope, drawing attention to it once more; “Will arrives next week - and this is your invitation.”

With a beleaguered inhale, she leaned over her armrest to take it, hiding bemusement at how childish the man was being in his insistence; “Hannibal, our professional relationship means that I cannot attend one of your dinner parties, no matter how many times you invite me.”

“Not a dinner party,” he corrected, “It’s your invitation to the wedding reception, as my colleague.”

Though she had known that this was coming, soon to be here, inevitable really, she still felt a pinprick of surprise. Moreso, she felt an odd intermingling of disquiet and curiosity towards the omega’s swift capitulation; though hardly a surprise to be unable to withstand such intense pursuit, it said something particularly unsavory about her colleague.

“You will be sitting faraway enough that no one would be able to question your conduct, but close enough to observe the entire event,” winked Hannibal, clearly teasing her on the predictability of her refusals. “It would mean a lot to me to share this moment with you.”

Well, when he put it like that…

This conniving prick.

Du Maurier replied with a bland smile.

After the absolute deluge of poetic waxing upon Will Graham's charms that she had been held hostage to over these past sessions, Lecter's stance on the relationship was probably visible even from the moon. What was less clear to her was good Will's cooperation, if there was any participation at all.

"Next week?" She queried wryly, tucking away the corners of her apprehension, "Usually a little more notice is given for weddings."

"Yes, the ceremony is in April, *Will* is arriving Saturday, apologies if I was unclear. I do believe six weeks should be ample enough notice."

How thoughtful. Wanting the maximum number of witnesses for his triumph parade. She wondered what the omega thought of it all, or if it's as she suspected; the young man was barely thinking at all and just instinctively reacting, overwhelmed by the avalanche of Lecter's persona after being plied with every emotional and mental tool the alpha could weaponize. Her colleague would have this omega at the altar, by hook or crook.

There was suddenly something insufferable about Lecter's happiness.

She slipped the invitation free; thick cardstock, borders in antique gold, the contents handwritten in a professional calligraphers' script. The feast would be on a Saturday evening at the Peabody Library, grand enough to parade the feather of nuptial bliss added to the alpha's colorful cap while maintaining an air of Old World sophistication that he was publicly lauded for.

"Congratulations, Hannibal," she smiled, genuinely pleased for the man against her reservations and slightly guilty to the young omega who was going to have to put up with Lecter's chicanery.

He inclined his head, gracefully accepting his due, "You also made contributions."

Bedelia Du Maurier took a deep bracing inhale of the Spring breeze drifting in from her open balcony doors. Yes she supposed she had played her role. She had somehow managed to convince Hannibal Lecter to cast off in search of an undiscovered country and now the young alpha was returning to the familiar shores of Baltimore having done some conquering with an ill-gotten treasure trove to decipher, enough to keep him occupied for years to come - years, because a lifetime was still a bit much to ask for but hope abounds.

She folded the invitation and dropped it back on the table, undecided if Will Graham would be the best thing that ever happened to Hannibal or if Lecter was the worst thing ever to happen to Will Graham.

"I'll be flying down tomorrow for the week, to help Will prepare for his move."

Help or bully? Help or exploit? Those seemed to get mixed up in Lecter's vocabulary. He was also extremely attached to the point of veering into possessiveness; Will Graham could

probably pack his own bags and didn't need to be monitored. But he probably did need watching - can't have him changing his mind before the finish line.

"Will has arranged for us to greet his father next Wednesday."

That should be interesting. She made a discreet record in her notes.

"Is Will close to his father?"

She knew the answer before she asked but she at least bothered to maintain appearances.

"I'd say no, Will never speaks of him. I honestly thought Will was an orphan when we first met."

Instinctual recognition?

But Hannibal had family, or he could have family if he didn't place the Atlantic Ocean between them.

"Does Will know of your family?"

"He knows," Hannibal leaned an elbow against the armrest of the armchair and ran a finger under his lips, eyes distant.

She wondered if he knew he did the same set of gestures whenever he talked about his family.

"I think in some ways he's happy they're dead. No expectations."

Right, she blinked, startled by the switch into bluntness.

"You still have family."

"Yes, my mother's surviving siblings and my cousins, and Chiyoh."

No mention of the aunt-in-law. He was probably dead to her, considering what he was.

"You're the youngest aren't you?"

"They all have families, I have quite a number of cousins once removed," smiled Lecter.

"In your generation though."

He inclined his head in acceptance; he was indeed alone, the youngest among cousins, those Italian alphas and omegas born of Simonetta Sforza's elder brothers and sisters.

It had been hard to get information about even something as basic as this from Lecter, akin to pulling molars; the alpha was set apart from his living cousins, his mother the surprise last child and only omega of her large family, who had the unfortunate fate of falling for Hannibal's father after meeting while on cultural exchange within the semi-neutral expanses of the Baltic Sea. They had courted on the shores of the Baltic and then she had left her entire

family to marry him, inciting the confusion, sorrow and fury of her clan. Four decades ago, such a separation may have been a separation for all time - and indeed it was.

The only one who emerged alive from behind the Iron Curtain was him.

Hannibal Lecter was younger than all his Italian cousins, older than all his cousins once-removed, and more like a distant grandnephew in the eyes of his Italian uncles and aunts. He had once had his Uncle Robertus and aunt-in-law and adopted cousin, but they exited the stage as quickly as they had appeared. She would pity him if his core wasn't utterly cold and untouched by any of it.

"Are they coming to the ceremony?"

He smiled brightly, "I couldn't stop them if I wanted to. Honestly I originally planned a more intimate gathering, but then Cousin Giulietta found out."

She had to cast her memories back a bit. The mentions of family were so rare that it was like searching for a polished ivory bead among a sea of white glass marbles.

"She runs the business side of the family's Nebbiolo vineyards," he prompted helpfully.

There was indeed such a person.

"How did she take the news?"

Her first reaction was to yell *MADONNA*!! Followed immediately by *NON MI DIRE*!! And then laughing until he had to hold the cordless at arms length to save his hearing.

Hannibal was quite the storyteller, wasn't he? She almost smiled at him.

The rest of their session covered Cousin Giulietta's effusive jubilation over the youngest in their generation finally settling down; how she had immediately worked her way into the preparations by insisting on providing a set of premium Barbaresco they kept cellared for him - oh she did this in secret when they first met 1984 in *hope* the effort wouldn't be in vain, ah how wonderful, eighteen years was just about right - and approximately 400 bottles were being shipped here to Baltimore, most of it for the bonbonniere. It took a minute to work out the cost; though the shipping was probably reasonable since the family was in the business, a bottle of well-aged Barbaresco ran into the hundreds of euros… Her colleague's taste had always been quite rarified.

Giulietta would attend with her husband, and it was highly likely her parents would come too, maybe even Uncle Lorenzo - but you could definitely count on Aunt Adalgisa coming. There's a few other names which the psychiatrist didn't bother remembering - Massimiliano, Lucrezia, a bunch of Galeazzo's and Domizio's and Caterina's. The only ones who Hannibal somewhat cared about besides Giulietta's immediate family were Bianca, little Piermaria and baby Cherubina who must be about nineteen and sixteen years old now - how time flies.

"It sounds like you'll have your hands full."

Hannibal shrugged, “I have room in the house and offered it, but only Piermaria and Cherubina will be staying with us. They’re trying to respect Will’s need for peace and quiet.”

Interesting.

Did Hannibal ask for this on Will’s behalf or did he actually share enough details for his cousin to make this deduction for herself, was this information inadvertent? Or was it deliberately leaked to invoke such a response?

Only Hannibal Lecter required her to perform post-therapy conversational autopsies.

Her hand moved on automatic to write *Pandora’s box* - and just as swiftly drew a line through it when she saw the term and turned it over in her head. She replaced it with *Event Horizon* and then because she was in a mood today - *Rabbit Hole*.

Bedelia Du Maurier felt an unwholesome satisfaction.

Hannibal continued to relate how the preparations were going. As per the usual custom of *confarreatio*, he had gone ahead and chosen and paid for everything; good Will would not be called upon to decide the color palette of tablecloths, napkins, vases or flowers or height of said flowers, china, cutlery, drapes or carpets. The omega would need to approve the menu, but the caterer had already been hired along with staff in charge of beverages - Hannibal would set the drinks menu when he eventually takes Will to sample the catering options. The bonbonniere hamper would include local artisanal honey, gourmet sweets and that bottle of Barbaresco. Will had already been measured by the event planner whom Hannibal had flown down last week. The alpha was going to leave the choice of modern tuxedo or traditional *pelisse* to Will but it was a given the omega would pick the former, since *pelisse* wedding jackets were still stuck somewhere in the 1700s; Will was thrifty at heart, he would want something he could reuse.

Hannibal talked about this for longer than expected, and it was much more interesting than she thought it could be. The contents were of mild interest, but the real draw was his enthusiasm.

Hannibal Lecter was getting married, and he was pulling out *all the stops*. Everybody who was anybody would know how happy he was and he would make them all rub their own faces in it, because it would just taste *that good.*

There’s an edge of sadism in his desire to host this lavish reception for ushering in his new life with Will Graham. It was blatantly obvious that he wanted his peers to burn and seethe in jealousy. It was a *nonviolent* way of satisfying that inclination, almost healthy, so there was really nothing she could object to.

Bedelia Du Maurier felt even mildly impressed.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“So am I,” smiled Hannibal, “Does this mean you’re confirming your attendance?”

She breathed in deeply as she deliberated.

The idea of seeing Hannibal's unicorn in the flesh was quite a lure. They wouldn't speak to one another, he never even had to know her name, who she was to Hannibal or even see her face. It would be a nice evening seated among colleagues, supping on delicious food and wine that even Hannibal Lecter's fussy palate could enjoy, with a bottle of 1984 Barbaresco waiting for her on departure - a wine you probably couldn't purchase even if you paid a large sum since this was the family's own supply.

It was a more than fair exchange for letting him rub all their faces in his domestic bliss.

"Yes," she said, "I'll be there provided nothing unexpected comes up."

Hannibal Lecter tilted his head in acknowledgement, quietly pleased, "I'll add you to the list."

"Are you open to a distraction?"

They were on the road to Gulfport and it was Wednesday, nine days after he had agreed to move to Baltimore and three days away from the date of departure. Will glanced at the alpha in the driver's seat before shutting his eyes again, feeling the foreign sensation of motion sickness try to crawl its way up his esophagus the moment he relaxed his vigilance.

"What do you have in mind?"

"A thought experiment."

Will wondered if it would be rude to ask the man to turn on the radio and find some generic classic rock instead as a distraction. Without doubt, Hannibal was a consummate host and conversationalist as proven during those three weeks in Baltimore, but he didn't know if he was up for a 'thought experiment' with a psychiatrist, even if he was going to marry this one.

"I have brought you and a friend of yours into a room; you stand facing one another, with a giant digital clock facing you; I wire you up to ambulatory ECG before handing you a gun."

Will cocked his head to squint at the alpha between his fingers, "What *kind* of experiment is this?"

"I'm doing electromyography on your hand, the one holding the gun. I'm testing your intent to act."

"Is this *classic Libet?* Aren't we twenty-years past this sort of ridiculous artificial scenario?"

Hannibal gave a soft laugh, the fondness in his eyes warming the car interior. "I assure you, the real thing I'm referring to is more sophisticated than that. You'll be making a simple

movement, yes, but as this is a thought experiment, I'm more curious about what you'll choose to do than the data I *won't* be collecting."

"Alright," breathed Will, intrigued despite how off he felt.

"So don't plan ahead, Will, you're doing it spontaneously - now look at the clock, note the time. Pretend I want to know what time it is when you first consciously intend to act. Are you imagining it?"

Eyes shut again, Will hummed in agreement.

"When you feel like it, pull the trigger and kill your friend."

Will sighed, sensing that this might be one of those stupid moral dilemma questions.

"Um, *why*?"

"Why does anyone pull the trigger?"

Will frowned as images came to mind; liquor store robbery in progress, terminally-ill man threatening to blow up a doctor's office, a child being held hostage by a shooter.

"You're free to abstain but since this is an experiment, you have to pull the trigger or else there's no readiness potential to detect and the experiment will end incomplete."

Will opened his eyes to stare at the alpha, still suspicious about where this was headed, "What are you even testing for? I mean *originally*, when it wasn't a thought experiment."

"To understand what you end up doing with your finger; study the particular neurons and milliseconds to understand the instant you felt yourself choosing to commit to killing."

A response came to mind, something he'd heard repeated by various investigators he'd shadowed at the precinct whenever they thought he was getting a bit too cerebral for their tastes; "The criminal justice system only cares about intent, irrespective of free will."

Hannibal chuckled quietly, "I know."

Yes, they already had this chat in Baltimore.

"Intent also plays a role in my work; when my patients struggle with the consequences of their decisions, I have four questions I always ask them."

"Such as?"

The alpha turned to look at him for a long moment, something wicked behind the indulgence in his gaze, "If you acted as you intended, and if so, when exactly was this intent formed? If you considered what else you could have done - if you feel a sense of ownership for your intent?"

Will ducked his head, some amorphous agony twisting his solar plexus and threatening to spill over onto his face. He covered his mouth and tried to hang onto his control over the nausea.

“I’m sorry, I’ve upset you,” said Hannibal, his voice hushed.

Will shook his head, because no, his reactions had nothing to do with the topic at hand. The alpha was deeply interested in free will versus determinism, though he considered himself a fan of *indeterminism* of all things - and those chats had been some of the most interesting conversations he’d ever had on the subject; and the *only* conversations he’s had on the subject since leaving college. Hannibal had summarized for him the many investigations being done by all manner of academics with their custom-knives and forks, nibbling away at the issue using biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, sociology, philosophy and theology. His reaction wasn’t to the conversation, it was *everything else*; being in this car with buttery leather seats, apprehensions about his father’s reaction to the alpha and how much he hated carrying this discomfort, (that he was relieved to leave and mortified at how he orchestrated the departure) that he *liked* Hannibal and didn’t want to, that he was ignoring the thing growing in his stomach and yet desperately attached to it; that he was making promises for things he didn’t know how to give.

“Can I do anything? Anything at all?

There’s a small pause, “Yes. It’s up to you.”

“Didn’t know psychiatry could be so philosophical.”

“I think that’s just me,” admitted Hannibal with a note of chagrin, then as a humorous aside; “One of my patients is a neurobiologist and we have some very interesting conversations about manipulating genes in rats and how that affects behavior; some of her research is being used to understand the influence childhood poverty has on how stress affects adult brains.”

Oh boy.

Will raised his eyebrows, “Sociology, neurochemistry and psychiatry. Should I clap?”

Hannibal chuckled softly, “I have several patients who stagger me with their intellect; one of them is making great strides in studying mood disorders and even moonlights as a pro bono consultant for public defenders working on murder trials.”

“Doing what?”

“Educating jurors about the impact of illness, head injuries or emotional trauma on cognitive processing.”

Outside a giant sign glided past announcing that the city of Gulfport welcomed them while a faded billboard that has seen better days proclaimed Gulfport to be the ‘Root Beer Capital of the World.’ Will realized that this was going to be the last time he saw this exact scene for maybe years, or even forever. If in the future he ever drove this way again, those two signs might be long gone.

“So my options are to - *one* - kill my friend. *Two* - fire the gun and intentionally miss. Or *three* - shoot myself.”

“Yes.”

He pictured it in his mind. Him standing with his gun cocked, Detective Lambert standing in front of him hand on hip, ambulatory ECG, large red on black digital timer counting the milliseconds, and the experiment’s monitor (Hannibal in a suit, Hannibal smiling at him in that way he does) in the corner staring at a laptop screen, making notations on a clipboard.

Will frowned, “Are you an option?”

“An option for what?

“Can I kill you instead?”

Hannibal began to laugh, his eyes squinting in delight at the macabre answer. Will didn’t know what kind of response he was supposed to give though he’s glad that it didn’t come off as weird - but then Hannibal was a little weird; it was kind of the thing about the alpha that kept him coming back. The man’s mirth was infectious and seemed unending, so a minute later, Will found himself smiling along despite his nausea.

“You said I could do anything.”

“Indeed I did,” Hannibal shook his head, still chuckling.

“Did I get it wrong?”

“There is no right or wrong answer, Will, but I must say - I’ve asked many people and you’re the first who tried to kill me instead.”

It was *just* a thought experiment, *right*? Will examined the alpha out of the corner of his eye but turned away quickly when he was caught by an affectionate grin.

“That wasn’t some sort of weird personality quiz ?”

“*No*,” Hannibal was quick to reassure him, a chuckle still rumbling in the back of his throat, “That was purely something I made up. And yet again, you surprised me.”

When did he surprise Hannibal the first time, Will wondered.

“I usually go left when people go right.”

“Sometimes you even turn around to go backwards,” noted Hannibal, a flirtatious purr.

“And occasionally I go right just to keep them guessing,” breathed Will, opening the window a crack now they were off the highway.

Hannibal chuckled, “Oh Will, you *delight* me.”

He didn't know how to respond to that. The man typically kept comments like that to himself, the buttering up more implied than spoken, displayed in actions and not words. He saw the intentionality of every gesture and expression in Hannibal Lecter's face and body; he was both attracted and repulsed by all of the messy baggage associated.

"Many of the newer philosophical concerns of today are unappealing to me," continued Hannibal, a subject change that Will welcomed.

A little something pooled in his chest, warm and fragile, because the alpha definitely did that on purpose.

"I prefer delving into Rousseau and his eighteenth-century contemporaries, and usually knead those ideas until they become frameworks I can apply to our current era; you'd be amazed at some of the predictions they made at the beginning of modernity, some of which we are experiencing now."

"Such as?"

Seeing that his mood had settled again, Hannibal smiled broadly, "Will, what would you say most of my patients are troubled by? On a fundamental level that is - what does their soul cry out for?"

A psychiatrist who didn't shy away from using the word 'soul'… Will smiled at the faint outline of the doctor in the passenger side window.

The alpha's clients were definitely those with money, especially if they were paying weekly for the privilege, so paying for gas and the mortgage were probably not an issue (at least you hoped not, or these people *really* needed help) but some things were universal; love, loss, anxieties about rebellious children or aging parents, difficult colleagues, hard-ass bosses, failing health, ennui.

"That they want to get some sleep?"

He wasn't joking. This world was getting faster and noisier, soon to be too fast, too noisy. But he wanted to answer Hannibal properly, return his earnest regard with an earnest response:

"Love."

The alpha answered him with a small reverent smile that stirred a finger in that tiny pool of feelings condensing deep within his ribs.

"Once food and shelter have been secured, our modern struggles to succeed seem like a never ending process of accumulation - and as someone delving into the psyche, I had to study the common ambitions for money, power and influence. Nowadays I firmly concede that these are not ends to themselves but a means to meeting a fundamental need we must fulfill in order to live on with meaning and purpose… Love, in all its myriad forms - to be seen, remembered, listened to, one's needs taken care of and one's failings treated with indulgence."

Will wondered if the alpha had some way to drug him via the cadence of his voice, to make his words so enticing, their conversations drifting from the inconsequential to the paradigm-altering and soul-destroying then back again in this endless crisscross that weaved up and down and all around him.

“To what purpose is all the toil and bustle of this mad world? What is the end of avarice and ambition, this pursuit of wealth, power and fame?” Hannibal continued, his steady soft narration taking on a surreal hypnotic languor, “It cannot be to supply the necessities; no, a basic wage will do for that. What then are the advantages of that great purpose we call *bettering our condition*…? Naturally it’s to be seen, attended to, with sympathy, contentment and approval. The wealthy glories in wealth because they feel that it brings them attention. The modern poor on the contrary are taught shame, their material lack placing them below the sight of others. To be unnoticed disappoints a facet of our most ardent of human desires; the desire to be known and loved.”

But to be loved *socially* as Hannibal was describing also had its flipside and that was fickleness; you might be popular today but one never knows what tomorrow holds. Of course, the man confided, if one were smart they would treat this kind of love as a game; meaningless but useful, a stepping stone to find someone with whom they could discover the love that truly mattered, the one that was celebrated and publicly acknowledged but ultimately handled badly by many. In this effort, a large number of betas go on to fail, unable to extricate themselves from worldly love in order to devote their entirety to this higher calling and accordingly suffers defeat at the gates. As an alpha, Hannibal had long been schooled on which love was valuable and which was just a means to an end.

“Lower material access, as long as it was enough to sustain someone, shouldn’t impinge upon one’s self-esteem,” because soldiers, explorers and plenty of others including Hannibal as a child had endured inconveniences and agonies for weeks, months and years without lasting impact on their sense of worth. But America and the new Age of Media (a world of betas) had somehow managed to hitch material access to dignity (worthy of love) and link low material access with humiliation (no love for you). Lack of riches, lack of beauty or skills to obtain said riches, was much worse than just simply owning less stuff; it excluded one from receiving their share of even prosaic love, which somehow translated into being unworthy of *any love,* even love of self.

Many of Hannibal’s patients suffered from all sorts of fears, thinking they were worried about their job or distant spouse or how frumpy and friendless they were, but all the alpha saw was their gross ignorance of love and death. Because of course death had its role to play - it’s the one certain thing in life, *unlike love*; and for more and more people, the notion of dying without having *success* now that God’s love was relegated to the bottom shelf…

To die without proving they deserved attention and getting that return on their investments in being *loveable*…

One might as well just die.

“If society were to offer love as a reward for picking up rubbish,” commented Hannibal with a strong tang of irony, “then it wouldn’t be long before the streets would be empty of trash.”

Will tilted his head and studied the man. He thought of Baltimore, the way that everyone flocked to Hannibal at the party, how sincere the alpha was when they were alone but almost disingenuously seductive in his charms among a crowd. He was not entering into this relationship empty-handed, Hannibal was trying to tell him without telling him. Because his choice of Hannibal had added another halo, *perhaps even an entire heavenly chorus*, to the crown that the alpha had been granted by his peers, subcultures that gave respect to the polite, the well-dressed, the educated, the capable and the witty - but most importantly, to those alphas whom were *loved* by an omega.

An omega's aegis is a gift that all alphas must strive for and cherish dearly once received, as natural beings and political entities.

Will didn't know who said that, some dead Frenchman paraphrasing a Greek philosopher probably, but the sentence suddenly made sense to him in a way it never had before.

Some facts he had heard from an omega who studied classical history came tumbling into his mind; how a large number of religious and political offices in the Roman Republic were only open to mated alphas, because an omega was an essential figure for moderating temperaments when debates became insults, and had a purity of being required to perform secret rituals to please the gods while their mates hosted the public ordinances of worship. That being widowed was akin to political death for an alpha in Rome; removed immediately from the aforementioned roles, and even banned from public life for a year if he or she had no omega offspring. Being born an omega in the Roman Empire meant access; one could shelter for free at any temple, gain instant citizenship if one were foreign and be guaranteed safety from enslavement. Kidnappings were common but mistreatment was an anathema. Because omegas had *aegis*.

"If you're interested, I have a copy of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in my home library; it can be a little dry, I paraphrased heavily," the alpha admitted, "but one shall have to forgive Mister Smith since it was published in 1759."

Will nodded faintly, genuinely surprised at the date of publication; he was interested because this *was* interesting, Hannibal was *interesting*. The psychiatrists he'd met in the past never delved into political theory or economics or philosophy only to drag them over the cliff of psychology. He knew that Hannibal Lecter was highly educated and well-read but it seemed that Miss Delia was correct as she always was: this doctor from Baltimore would make him very happy if Will let him.

He didn't know why this thought made him even more nauseous but he groaned and clutched at his forehead, sinking as far down into the seat as he could.

"*Sorry*."

"You have nothing to apologize for," the alpha soothed, a hand on Will's leg; "I cannot imagine a more happy problem."

Yeah, he wasn't sure if Hannibal would sing the same tune if Will threw up right here and now.

The car came to a stop a minute later and Will jerked up in alarm thinking they were there already, only to realize that they were parked next to an office building.

“I’m okay, really. We should keep going.”

“This is more for me,” Hannibal admitted with a small grin. And then with this almost constipated look on his face, he confessed, “I’m nervous, Will.”

Oh.

“And I also have to apologize for doing a poor job of distracting you.”

Will picked up the hand on his leg and squeezed it; he wanted to say, don’t be nervous, it’s going to be fine, that the alpha didn’t need to worry about him but he couldn’t - because honestly, it was *fucking dreadful*. His body was changing because this was the first time and he was more or less going through second puberty; his body doing stuff without his input, the most disturbing of which was producing hormones to gradually soften his *pelvic symphysis* so it could open in due time like a - like a - !

No description seemed apt.

It wouldn’t be painful at all, the doctor had reassured him, like *that’s* what he cared about; he had heard enough pop culture references about ‘magical omega hips’ from classmates to colleagues and random rude strangers to know it wouldn’t hurt. It would just *paralyse him for a month or three.*

“He knows of us, doesn’t he?” Hannibal finally asked, somewhere between curious and amused.

“*He knows.”*

He didn’t mean for that to sound as dark as it came out.

Dave Graham knew as of last Wednesday, when Will went and gave a preface so he wouldn’t have a heart-attack today. He didn’t tell his father about the other thing. He wasn’t sure how to talk about that yet.

Hannibal continued staring at him, something intent behind his dark gaze, a smile that made it seem like something entertained him though it shouldn’t and that entertained him even more.

“What did he say?”

Nothing. His father never said anything.

“Why does he need to say something? You’re not marrying him.”

Hannibal let out a little chuckle at the deadpan response.

“I don’t want anything to get in the way of what we have.”

Will heaved a sigh and had to resist the urge to shake the alpha off when his hand was taken hostage, enclosed in both of Hannibal's like it was a small precious animal to be petted. This was still difficult for him, the whole hand-holding thing; he could never stop thinking about how clammy his hands were, when he last washed them, the smooth kernel of a long-healed burn on Hannibal's right hand between his index and middle finger.

"This *isn't* the nineteenth century," he settled on, his teeth crunching on the tees and cees.

Hannibal took a deep breath and exhaled loudly, the first symptom of actual nervousness that he'd allowed to peak through his unfaltering composure, "I want to be respectful."

"You're introducing yourself, that's respectful enough."

The older man gave him a wide-eyed look, a slow smile stretching his lips like he couldn't believe the amount of spite Will just managed to grind out from a perfectly polite string of words.

"I understand that beta parents normally expect to meet whoever their children's dating before it gets serious enough for a pledge."

Will exhaled as all the irritation left him for an embarrassing temptation to *giggle*; even the words coming out of Hannibal's mouth sometimes… This couldn't be a translation issue, the alpha's English was too good for that; so it must just be something among European alphas - or maybe Hannibal was just special.

"Well, being independent and making our own decisions is also a beta thing."

"I can't help how I feel. You rarely speak of him. The only things I know are his profession and that his name is David."

"He's harmless."

Just grumpy and *rude*.

"People would say the same about me," Hannibal whispered, his face close and getting closer as he leaned their foreheads together, his smile small and tender, "And yet, I am already considering what I'd do if someone harmed you."

Will huffed a laugh and pulled away, grimacing as another bout of nausea rolled through him. Sweet, kind of *creepy*, but alright... He had *pledged his troth*, in Hannibal-speak and a little weird was actually the most fun thing one could discover about a Significant Other after committing.

Hannibal nuzzled at the side of his neck, a caress of comfort and then handed him a thermos of lemon tea. He watched intently as the omega took a sip before restarting the car and pulling back into traffic.

"Our earliest experience of love comes from our parental figures. Babies cannot by definition repay this care with material rewards."

Will begged to differ. There was a *literal* grant for parents of lower income who had an omega child, funded by Trusts left behind when notable American families had been wiped from existence by ill-advised participation in two world wars without accounting for the Spanish flu or drunk driving and defenestration.

Off the top of his head, various feudal societies like Joseon Korea, the Bengal Sultanate and even the damn Vikings had given benefits to betas who had omega children; a guarantee of provisions until the omega was was old enough for religious/martial duties or packed off to whichever local alpha overlords took fancy to them. Further back, omegas born of slaves were always offered to the service of the gods, settled with a sum of silver on the steps of temples. In post-classical Europe, it usually raised the status of the whole family, who would gain a living and sometimes even a minor title that could only be passed on to their omega child's future issue - if the alpha they'd marry one day didn't have enough titles already to spread around among the spares. Across times and cultures, beta-born omegas were hoarded by lower nobility, wealthy literati and merchants like blue chip stocks; purchased, swindled or guilt-tripped from beta underlings, a means of access to social mobility; wealthier beta families would take them as adopted daughters and sons, social climbing via eugenics. Of course, this struck a little differently now he understood what Hannibal and many alphas past and present stood to lose or gain on the basis of an omega's goodwill.

"Though our friends and lovers promise not to forsake us if we end up unemployed, sick or jailed, one knows deep down in our hearts that this is simply not how our world works despite all claims to the contrary. Our antidote is the love we experienced when we couldn't bathe, threw up half the food we were fed, only communicated via crying and yelling, and had not a penny to our names."

Lost in mulling over the words, it took him a moment to realise what Hannibal actually meant; that his father for all his imperfections had never *used* Will, his parental love wholly natural with no messy calculations of profit.

"This is what makes the love of parental figures so pure and incredible, even divine, and what makes the distortion of that love so profoundly damaging to the human psyche."

Love as God loves, he mouthed under his breath, gripped by an image of his grandmama that swung itself out of his memory ocean like an errant wave, crashing over him with all its salt and bluster. Her saggy apple-round cheeks, her enormous blue eyes, like his own but so open, so keen with a luminosity to them that he couldn't find in his reflection no matter how long he spent scrying. The way those blue orbs were brimming with tender warmth when she fixed them upon his face, her hand on his shoulder, her breath upon his hair. His nausea receded, washed under a tide of emotions that spread across his body like a childhood blanket that had been sucked and gnawed on.

He didn't want to think about her like that, her face and her hands and her breath. Despite himself, he suddenly wished he could hold Hannibal's hand again.

"Have you been to this restaurant before?"

Will shook his head. He had passed by a hotel on Wednesday and gone inside just to check the brochures left out for the tourists and ask a few questions of the reception staff to figure

out what was recommended by locals and what was just advertising. They had been nice, but of course they were faced with him as he was *now*, his old clothes in a dumpster and newly armored by Hannibal.

The restaurant was probably not up to Hannibal's standards but he'd have to suck it up - because Will wasn't about to make the alpha cook for this. His father could scoff at someone else's cooking today, and no one would get murdered at the dining table.

"I think I need to apologize."

Hannibal tilted his head to look at him but quickly had to focus back on navigating the streets as they drew closer to their destination. "Have you done anything that requires an apology?"

"It's for what's about to happen."

"What's about to happen?"

"He's going to be rude."

The alpha's mouth creased, "I won't think anything less of you for having a rude relative - like you said, this isn't the nineteenth-century."

Will snorted, "Yeah don't forget that later when you want to kill him."

Hannibal Lecter smirked, "I promise, Will, I'll be on my best behavior."

At least someone will be.

Dave Graham looked across the table at the young couple and let the silence reach in to seize the space between them now that the pleasantries, mindless small talk over food and initial joust was done with.

Will could guess what was on the man's mind; that Hannibal had ten years on him, spoke like a snake, looked like a dandy - being a doctor was good, it's hard work, but what's with this psychiatry thing; that the alpha reeked like an oriental bonfire, and was dressed same as those parading folks at the docks during the summer high season, those ones with screechy idiotic laughs as they chattered, pouring food and drink down their gullets, pleasantly civil but ultimately blind to those servicing the boats keeping their fat butts dry.

(Unseen, until Will was old enough to follow him to the docks - that was a whole other problem)

He had already broken the news to the man on the Wednesday hoping to give him time to process - but he may as well have wasted that entire trip because his father was still in a snit. Will tried to ignore his discomfort; in another few days, he would be leaving for Baltimore, and he really didn't want to leave on an argument.

Next to him, the alpha slid an arm around the back of his chair, unaffected by the stilted air. He reclaimed the envelope containing a cheque for Dave Graham to use on a new suit and the barbers, sliding it easily back into his suit's inner breast pocket. Sure it looked a little weird,

maybe even bad to be giving money at their first time meeting each other as prospective in-laws, but it's not like Will hadn't sent money on the semi-regular. To say that while Will was *sitting right there,* ***to say it like he did-***

He inhaled his lemonade, feeling the bubbles burn on their way down, adding to the awl stuck in his side.

A hand grasped his shoulder and then let go, offering discreet comfort. The alpha's body remained angled towards Will, his smile as easy as ever and his manners the epitome of serene as though he had not just witnessed his future father-in-law behaving like an asshole. Will exhaled, feeling a little of the tension leave him.

"You'll need a new suit."

"I'll be fine."

"*You need a new suit*," he wasn't going to be begging the man to like his choices but the least he could do was not be a bastard about it; "There's a color scheme."

There *was* a color scheme - well, for Will and the other omega attendees. But Dave Graham had never been to a wedding much less a fancy wedding so he didn't know *shit* about anything.

"Alright then," the man agreed gruffly after a beat.

Good.

Will heaved an angry sigh and didn't bother hiding it.

Finally.

At least the old man had enough common sense to acknowledge that Will knew better than him, on these matters anyway. It's just about the only weapon of deterrence that he had to beat the man's stubbornness down.

Next to him, the alpha kept a respectful silence, pretending ignorance to the undertone of the exchange. Will turned to look at Hannibal and was greeted by a smile; his relief at the alpha's unflappable attitude was quickly strangled by a strand of disquiet. The psychiatrist had a slight glow behind his eyes that said he had just collected a *motherlode* of data, enough to pick apart Will's childhood to its barest ribs.

There was some back and forth regarding when Dave Graham would fly up. It's not said that Hannibal was footing the bill for the flights, but Hannibal was footing the bill, just like the alpha was footing the bill for lunch and the prenatal vitamins and everything else; who was he to tell the alphas where to get their kicks.

There was something so odd about sitting down together like this, having a meal.

They'd eaten at Wendy's when he finished at the Academy. They didn't get together for his high school graduation, because the busy summer season had begun and Will was working

too - even with a grant and a free place to sleep, college *burned* money.

White tablecloths fluttered around them, empty except for their table as the weather was on the cooler side for alfresco even if they were on the Mississippi coastline, a step from the Sea of Mexico. Sun fell in flecks and bolts upon the table as a sea breeze ruffled the canopy above them. A curl of hair tickled at Will's eyes and he barely had time to get irritated at it before the alpha was there, brushing a finger over his cheek to tuck it behind his ear, a flare of heat rising as the sweetness of the gesture intermingled with his embarrassment.

He'd gotten used to it, he realized, gotten used to how the alpha treated him - the gentling and caressing, the familiarity of touch and proximity - without thinking about how it looked.

Across the table, Dave Graham paused, a strange expression momentarily pinching his brows before he carried on finishing his beer with stoic indifference.

Will decided he could live with the non-reaction.

"You can come up on Thursday, stay at the house," Hannibal said at the same time he said, "We'll get you a room, there's a hotel near the venue."

There's an awkward pause.

Dave Graham's role was to see through the ceremony, stand still for some pictures, and then get drunk but not too drunk at the lavish reception. There was no need for Hannibal to play nice and host him for Will’s sake; in fact it would be out of character for them.

The omega felt paralysis creep up on him whenever he thought about it, the wedding.

It was *originally* supposed to be something small, the alpha had confided with a sorry-not-sorry smile - family, Miss Delia and anyone from Laurie who wanted to come, Hannibal's mentors. But then his favorite Italian cousin found out about it; Hannibal was the last one to settle down in his generation, and there were *expectations*.

The wedding planner, Ms. Justine, arrived the day after Hannibal had at news of the thing, flying down from Baltimore with two suitcases, an assistant and two laptops, because there was no time to waste if they wanted everything perfect by April. The beta woman was plump and jovial, sporting a nasally French-adjacent accent (Mauritian Creole, Hannibal murmured to him much later) and a toothy grin. The contract to be their event coordinator had been signed back mid-October, and she was tickled pink, her enthusiasm overflowing since this was the first time *and may be the only time ever* she threw a reception that merged contemporary expectations with medieval sumptuary laws.

Apparently if he would allow it, Hannibal had already picked out an Honorable Omega for Will; Sabine was an older omega of impeccable taste who Hannibal counted among his close friends, and right now, she was basically acting in the place of Hannibal’s dead mother by coordinating with Ms. Justine so Hannibal could waste his time down here getting Will ready to throw his life away.

It was just tragic that she had gone to Switzerland this last winter to be with family for the holidays and therefore totally missed her chance to meet Will, but oh she was so looking forward to it!

Will hadn't let himself respond to the knowledge that Hannibal had already decided then, *back in October* - sure, Hannibal had said so last week but it wasn't like he'd just *believe that* - had told his few friends and paid what had to be thousands of dollars to set everything in motion from the moment he responded to the alpha's advances with any hint of serious consideration. It was probably a good thing that Hannibal knew what he wanted, was certain.

Someone needed to be.

His father's eyes flicked to the doctor's hand over the back of Will's chair, "A room nearby would do. I'm sure you've family coming over, you'll need the space."

And Dave Graham wasn't going to subject himself to watching his kid get pawed at, or making nice with the uptight folks whom Hannibal Lecter called family. He would do what he's always done - stay on his side of the fence.

Will tried not to be *sensitive* about what the man wasn't saying, what other guests would say when they finally met his father and what his father would grumble back. His shoulders tightened as his imagination began to slide, his fingers moving about like so many little crabs over his thighs.

Hannibal's leg nudged his, a gentle query of concern, startling him out of his fidgeting. Will glanced to the side and was caught in that magnetic gaze layered with intent, a wry little dip of lips he'd tasted a hundred times or more.

He didn't nudge the man back but the pressure didn't relent. Their knees remained touching under the drape of the tablecloth.

Dessert came - pie for the old man, brownie with a side of ice cream for him - and for awhile, it seemed like the conversation had moved back to more banal things; the bad lobster season in Maine and how this drove up all seafood prices though it shouldn't have because it wasn't like there was only one option for sourcing lobsters. No one actually cared what they were talking about. They were passing time, like they had been passing time from the moment they took their seats and ordered lunch, talking about the various harbors that Dave Graham had worked at over the years and how they had changed, where the alpha did his schooling (Paris, Switzerland, Johns Hopkins, then Italy and Johns Hopkins again) and what they were going to do about Will's work situation (nothing - because he going to take two years off - but he had mumbled something about going back to school for another degree just to get the man off his case.)

Hannibal hadn't ordered any dessert, the choices too pedestrian, but his stare made Will feel obligated to share so he ended up feeding the alpha a spoonful offhand.

It's not sexual, it's not even flirtatious but the act was taken as *flagrant* showboating anyway. Conversation died a slow death after that but the meal was *done*, parent-child obligations discharged with.

When they said goodbye, the only one smiling was Hannibal.

"Well, that was nice," murmured the alpha as soon as they were on their own and headed for the car; then contrary to his genial air of '*peace on earth and all is right in the world*,' slid an arm around Will, a faint touch of commiseration about the kiss he pressed to the omega's temple.

Will didn't allow himself to feel the heat that needled behind his eyes.

"I need a drink."

It's a shock when the alpha actually walked him to the hotel next door and ushered him into a corner seat at the bar lounge.

"Are you sure I can drink this?" He asked suspiciously, staring down his faint reflection in the cherry-red of the Pinot Noir before him.

Opposite, Hannibal picked up his own wine and touched the glass to his, the crystal making a soft musical ding.

"How much do you know about your own physiology, Will?"

He picked up the glass by the stem and considered it, smelled it, imagined it on his tongue.

"Not as well as you do," he said before mentally cringing because that sounded like a come-on when he was really just referring to Hannibal's medical background.

Will cleared his throat, "This isn't a test, right?"

The alpha chuckled into the rim of the glass, "When it's a test, Will, I assure you, you will know."

He nodded slowly, picked up the glass then hesitated and put it back down. He tapped a few times at the base, his fingers restless, "I think I need to consult a doctor."

Under the table, Hannibal's shoe came into contact with his ankle. Will moved his leg away with a roll of his eyes because this was a granite table and there was no tablecloth to hide things. The alpha let out a huff of amusement and went back to sipping his wine.

"One of the interesting things about omega physiology that made them symbols of fecundity of the premodern world was their incredibly hardy constitutions upon conceiving," Hannibal explained, "Your liver isn't just split into four lobes but six, your circulatory system is uniquely adapted to surviving grievous harm, and many other interesting adaptations which are still being explored by biologists and engineers - it may interest you to know that nowadays, advanced filtration systems are modeled after how blood is supplied to the omega uterus."

Will only took one thing away from all that; "*I can drink?"*

“A hundred and fifty milliliters a day - my apologies, five ounces - won’t have any impact at all,” Hannibal smiled, “Beer or wine naturally, no whisky.”

“Wasn’t thinking it…” he murmured before finally, hesitantly taking a sip of the red wine. It was as fresh and sweet and red as it smelled. It tasted like forbidden fruit.

“It should be noted that until the last hundred or so years, alcohol was often a verified safe drink of class. What we label as moscato was just strong fruit juice for the wealthy children of La Serenissima.”

“Done in by a random sip of polluted water, or death by alcohol poisoning - not to mention flu,” he breathed, feeling honestly better after a taste though that sip didn’t have enough alcohol to sterilize a paper cut.

“And famine and war; tuberculosis, leprosy, gangrene and tumors,” smiled Hannibal, “Drinking some wine with your supper becomes a very small thing to wring your hands over once contrasted against the full backdrop of reality.”

Perspective, now *that* was something he needed quite desperately. He felt as though he had been staring very hard down a tunnel and now the prospect of turning around to leave it was… overwhelming.

(In the attic of his mind, Haschen was quiet now - and that was enough for him)

But he had to leave the tunnel, *he had to.*

“You can always ask me about anything you’re uncertain of; the burden of caring for you is no longer a burden that’s yours alone, Will.”

That… stung more than he expected, *ouch*.

He leaned back in the chair to look out the floor to ceiling windows next to them. They were on the third floor and it felt as though he could slip through the glass and plummet. The image immediately triggered a stab of terror/revulsion through his gut and he grabbed at his solar plexus on reflex.

Will snapped back around to face the bar lounge.

“Better now?”

He nodded and took another sip, a *bigger* sip.

“How did I do?” Hannibal asked, “I didn’t see any shotguns or shovels.”

Will snorted a laugh because oh *now* the alpha was just being deliberate. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t own a shotgun or a shovel - he borrows the neighbor’s if he needs them and only owns a bowie.”

Chapter End Notes

Too tired to think of the titles right now so using wine names
Also I know where I left off last time but picking up that thread takes time - this chapter is meant to be way longer but it was getting ridiculously unwieldy so the rest is now chapter 28
I am obsessed with imagery cos I never studied literature though I read a lot, I actually majored in art history hahaha
Themes - free will vs determinism, intent vs outcome, falling/out of control, threes (Wednesday, hump day, the in between day, the top of the roller coaster curve, Saturday, nine days, trilogy)
Every conversation is double talk - Hannibal is always saying something else and he's actually a huge bastard
Will the narrator is always talking around his discomfort, deflecting and disassociating emotions
Will - mirrors (reflections/glass) and water (seas, pools, ripples)
Hannibal - fires, darkness, bone, animal behaviour (he dragged political theory economics and philosophy off a fucking cliff, salivating, provoking Bedelia now n then to test her, a starving lion but in front of Will, he purrs)
Please ask if you have questions about wtf Hannibal goes on about -the last 7 years offline made me even more socially challenged but I love intellectual waffling

Sauvignon + Chambourcin

Chapter Summary

Bedelia knows but about nothing that truly matters
Will is about to become an astronaut
Hannibal is very much in favor of heresy
What an excellent day for an exorcism
Let's smash some teacups

WARNINGS FOR HANNIBAL -Please for the love of your phone laptop whatever DO NOT EAT OR DRINK WHEN YOU READ HIS SECOND SCENE WITH BEDELIA trust me

Chapter Notes

BGM suggestion for when Hannibal talks:
Litvonovsky - Tales of Magic Tree: IV Spider Knows His Craft
For Will's ups and downs, you can't go wrong with Vivaldi's Four Seasons, the Max Richter arrangement is my pref. You can also try Jacob's Piano version of 10 pieces by Ludocivo Einaudi
This is a HUGE CHAPTER

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Past: March 2003

"I met David Graham."

Ah, the beta in-law. This should be good.

"How was the meeting?"

Lecter's mouth slowly stretched into a mild-mannered smile, an arrogant tilt of lips, his eyes fixed on the view outside her office balcony. There was contempt in that small smile, contempt and a bit of pride.

"Educational. I understand more of how Will grew up, to become as he is."

"Which is?"

“Orphaned, like myself.”

Well, hopefully that was metaphorical and figurative, and not predictive.

“Does Will feel the same?”

The man tilted his head, eyes dark with something that might be indignation or antipathy, “Will is too close to the matter to see clearly.”

And Lecter would be the one to correct that oversight, of course he was.

She felt her distaste rising at this slip up from behind his little veil of conformity, before her pen gradually drew to a stop mid-word as a revelation came upon her like a sharp violent squall. Hannibal Lecter had just put down his false humility to tout his ascendency over his future mate’s father, his attachment deep enough to awaken an urge to stake out even *that* role in Will’s life.

Well.

Her pen began to move again, picking up speed.

“It is not uncommon for adults to either deny or misremember a neglectful childhood, driven by an imperative to survive.”

The alpha had some trauma in common with Will Graham, whether he allowed himself to acknowledge it or not. More strange thoughts came to her as if slingshot from a gravity well, coming on fast and abrupt enough to make her eyes widen; this intense interest in the omega’s upbringing, could it be…? Would Hannibal heal his own childhood trauma through debriding the omega’s festering wounds? Her eyes probed the man’s distant expression with laser-focus, eager for insight.

Alphas in intimate relationships with omegas had become an increasingly engaging area of study for neuroscience as medical imaging continued to improve; there were *always* noticeable changes in cognitive processing once the pair had been intimate, which made the data collection process rewarding.

At times, the changes were subtle and other times, it was basically akin to a chemical imbalance like what a beta might experience during their own mating and courtship process - and then there were these rare cases where it was like a nuclear bomb had obliterated whatever had been there before, the alpha’s brain a technicolor disco rave or a 9.9 Momentum Magnitude Scale report. The images on PET, MEG, ECG and all manner of scans and measurements, all norms skewed without a point of reference in sight; there were immense implications for the biochemistry of desire and attachment from these studies.

“To maintain a narrative of mutual attachment for the sake of continued emotional stability,” summed up Hannibal, with the pinpoint brilliance that made him as good a psychiatrist as a trauma surgeon. “He has to lie to himself, to acknowledge the resentment would mean breaking the last and only familial tie he has, and confirm the fear that he was unwanted after all.”

Bedelia Du Maurier knew that she couldn't grasp this alpha's psyche with generalities as she might her other patients, but as he continued to relay the interactions of his beloved Will with the beta father, she could fathom a guess at some of the reasons that made Hannibal seek out his future mate's father…

The man was obviously contemptible to the alpha but Hannibal would play nice for now, unwilling to risk possible rejection if Will should choose his birth father over this new relationship, unlikely as it was with the amount of investment that Hannibal had made. Despite the loose relationship he had with truth, Lecter was honest about one thing in a way that was heartening as it was alarming: Will Graham was the most sublime creature in the world and he would have him, all of him. But the alpha was cautious - for they were not yet at the finish line of the current campaign, and defeat at the last stretch due to complacency was the most bitter and cruelest defeat of all.

Even if this parental bond was painful, it was a pain that the omega knew.

As the session continued, it was clear that despite already being certain of the omega's favour, Hannibal never allowed himself to lose sight of this, with a clarity of vision and lack of self-delusion that was startling and completely overturned several previous conceptions of his character and pathology.

What would Hannibal Lecter's brain scans look like, she wondered idly: a frenzied painting by a manic Pierre Soulages?

In this period of time just before the *confarreatio,* Will Graham was still slippery and could not be triggered; the young man was used to an avoidant attachment style endemic among beta-born omegas in the United States, and these omegas had a reputation for being runners, hard to pin down.

And Lecter would not be able to pin this omega down by force, not if the descriptions of Will Graham's personality were accurate, only entice him to remain in the nest which was being built for the two of them because the law and society would side with Will; there were plenty of alphas out there still waiting for their 'One day… Some day…'

On one hand Hannibal acknowledged these feelings of loyalty, misplaced though they were in his opinion, with insight afforded to those in their line of work - that this was an indicator of Will's kind character and a hopeful prognosis of loyalty to Hannibal.

Hannibal, who would provide more for the young man than anyone had ever attempted to in the past - materially, intellectually, socially, sexually - and if things went her colleague's way, he would take over the care and feeding of his omega's mental and emotional needs too, would surely gain a loyal companion if he were to allow time and proximity to do their work.

However, her colleague was also directly facing this issue as an alpha who wanted to dethrone David Graham in the emotional map of his beloved Will's psyche.

Immediately.

Preferably yesterday.

Because Lecter was a petulant *child* in some ways.

“Legally and perhaps genetically, Will is his child. But mentally and emotionally, he hasn’t been Will’s father for a long time, perhaps never.”

Preferably never, she read in between the lines.

Perhaps genetically? She frowned.

Hannibal caught her look and explained, “There is a resemblance but short of a paternity test, it’s impossible to confirm.”

“Is this important?”

The man’s mouth twitched, “Not at all, what draws me to Will is his mind, nothing else matters...”

Well, she was sure that the omega being easy on the eyes played a part; it was universally acknowledged that omegas as a group were unapologetically gifted in their looks.

“However?” She prompted, sensing the hesitation.

“I am perplexed why Will was left in this man’s care. Even with proof of paternity, he seems unsuited for raising a child.”

Much less an omega child, a prized golden goose of the genetics lottery; the last and most complete masterpiece of God and human evolutionary mutation.

“While there has historically been efforts to redistribute omegas for their protection and well-being in the US, those were inevitably prone to corruption.”

Hannibal inclined his head in easy agreement. People were self-serving, it was a tale old as time.

“What about Will’s mother?”

One edge of Hannibal’s mouth lifted up in what was a roguish smirk, which would be contemptuous except for his gaze, shining with something far more obsessive than simple adoration:

“Will may as well have sprung from the sea.”

It took admirable control to marshal her eyebrows on remaining neutral and her face on being impregnable, because once again, he had just overturned her construction of him.

How…romantic.

He had always professed a love for *La Primavera*, this was just a step to the left.

But back to the subject at hand:

“What did his father teach Will?”

Now the contempt was gone. Lecter was smiling again, cheerfully, because he was a bastard after all.

“He devalued him.”

And this was a good thing for her fellow alpha. A well-adjusted Will Graham would not be suitable for his unusual tastes and requirements for a mate. His less salient emotional needs would be satiated for years to come, maybe even decades on the torment of his omega’s overwhelming empathy.

He wouldn’t even need to do anything, he could just innocently lie back and observe, absorb, *savour*.

“He hoped Will could ascend the directive of his physiology, he taught Will how to fix motor engines with that aim - and became offended when Will used his aegis and went to college instead.”

How insulted David Graham must have felt, his way of life rejected. That sense of denigration had even transformed into an equally virulent disgust for his child.

Will Graham had rationally inserted himself into the order of things, he had taken his biological value as a progenitor of gods and titans and leveraged it for free access to higher education that cost more than the entire summary of his father’s assets, past and future, in hope of belonging.

To this beta, his child had simply prostituted his future value as an alpha’s best genetic partner for easy monetary and social gain.

Will however was just trying to find some place of refuge.

The misunderstanding was entirely on the part of the elder Graham, and that was the tragedy.

With his keen insight, Will Graham knew he could not get through with any explanations and so he bore this shame heaped upon his head in stoic silence.

He had mortgaged himself and now the repayment was at hand.

“A clash in values is often the first symptom of an impending parent-child schism.”

Hannibal took a deep breath, hands steepled; “It would be easier.”

“What would be easier?”

“If Will abandoned him,” said the man in a casual almost idle tone of voice completely at odds with the gravity of his statement.

A tingle went up her spine. She did not know why it had been triggered; Lecter's face was once more a deep dark pool, nothing to see.

"For you or for Will?" She finally posed into the sudden drop of silence.

It was not unusual for traditional families to cling to their omega progeny, to keep watch even when the matured fruit of their loins took her or his first steps into married life. Most of the time, this was based upon a healthy desire to provide emotional support and guidance to a new couple navigating each other and learning to cleave together. Other times it was nothing short of intrusion, well-intentioned though it may be. Hannibal would obviously not be dealing with these issues, when by his description, Will seemed determined to wave his flag of independence in his beta father's face, out of spite if nothing else. But that did not stop her young colleague from experiencing a desire to block even the slightest possibility of interruption.

"For him…" Hannibal murmured, thoughtful, "And for myself."

It was a good start, acknowledgement.

Bedelia Du Maurier peered down at her page packed with notes, her writing hand complaining mildly of the workout they were getting.

Even if her colleague's desire for possession of his chosen mate's transcendence did not allow even a single occupant of Will's attention without his explicit permission, a mindset not conducive to a healthy and sane marriage, he was at least aware and engaging with the slavering beast in his heart.

She wondered vaguely what would happen when inevitably, there was reproduction and he would have to share.

Now there's an idea: Hannibal Lecter reproducing.

Ha.

Beyond the car window, a burly bearded man in a padded jacket paused at the lights despite the signal telling him to walk; the large dog he had on a leash sniffed at the base of the traffic light. Will wondered what the dog could smell, if there was a large woman and equally stout children somewhere keeping warm, waiting for the pair to return.

It was warm inside the car but he pulled up the scarf around his neck, somehow still cold. The lights changed and they began to move again. The man and dog would have to wait for the next time the pedestrian lights bled green.

"…People obey because they don't want to take risks or get into trouble."

Maneuvering with ease through familiar streets, Hannibal ran a hand over his thigh, a warm pressure.

“It’s always easier to accept censorship, less painful, less work,” he murmured, everything a little out of focus now that he was here, *finally here*, in Baltimore City.

The discussion had begun originally about an exercise that Hannibal would do with his patients trying to make a difficult decision - like quitting a job that was literally killing them because their health problems were worse with every moment of stress, every exertion of endurance, every act of denial - and it wasn’t even like most of his patients needed this money to live on. Then somehow they began to talk about conformity, the American obsession with work. Even when one didn’t need the money from work, how could you *not work* in a world where the first way to filter possible friends and future spouses was to ask them what they did for work. Corporations had really capitalised well on this; take the innate human need for love and approval then have it serve their own ends.

“I could understand if it were merely external, that you must obey or forfeit your life but I find it very troubling that people accept and even more when they embrace it, engaging in self-censorship.”

Hannibal had a lot to say about conformity and censorship. By the very bodies they had been granted by God, fate and genetics, the Lecter’s could not conform to what their overseers found acceptable. Usually they stayed under the radar, but all it would take was one visit from the Commissar…

“Even America which worships at the altar of individual freedom persuades us there is only one way to live.”

“And anyone who doesn’t live like that is weird, or crazy - or Amish.”

The alpha huffed in amusement at the quip. The touch on his thigh transferred to his fidgeting hands, their digits entangling before the alpha returned his hand to the wheel.

“Servitude to employment, abdication of personal desire, I see it everyday among my patients,” the alpha noted wryly, with an undertone of lament.

“Not to mention being duped by an imitation of freedom - the *freedom* of consumer choice.”

Hannibal laughed then, this lovely rasping chuckle, the entire car filled with the glow of his delight. Will quirked a small tired smile, feeling a bit of that warmth enter his chest, slide into the tiny pool of feelings. Inertia pulled him towards the left as they turned the corner.

“This world makes it very easy to forget our right to say *no* against the absurdities of modern life.”

”*No* but thank you, try the next idiot?*”*

Hannibal Lecter smiled broadly, with reverent feverish adore; *yes, exactly.*

Everyone at Laurie House had known he was leaving before he knew that he was leaving. There was little to pack. It was tradition to come with the bare minimum, to allow his mate to furnish him with new belongings; new clothes for a new omega, new shoes for a new beginning, and other trite conventions. The practice went back to the days of the ancients, or so AP History claimed; Will suspected some capitalist revisionist trickery to make people buy more stuff.

Hannibal had spent the week helping him sort out whatever he hadn't given away already to his father or the other tenants. Except Hannibal was still not allowed inside Laurie House so Will had taken to throwing down bags of clothes, bedding and miscellany off the balcony and having the alpha catch them. That had been actually *fun*, until Hannibal threw everything except what he'd personally bought during the courtship into the trash can and they had a really awful conversation about why Will wanted to punch his lights out for doing that, and he reaffirmed why he *hated psychiatrists*.

(They whisper-shouted in the inner courtyard, the only place where anyone who wasn't omega could visit in Laurie House and Hannibal had used *professional* terms until he caved like wet tissue. He should *hate him.* He'll get on to hating him about April, after the wedding…)

The day after, Hannibal had taken him to a beautiful double galleries house wreathed in wisteria exactly between the Gardens and the Quarter. He had walked past it once or twice, aware it wasn't a private home because of zoning but not particularly curious why it was always quiet. He had thought it was a small business, something niche without visits from clients because the transactions were mostly conducted over the phone, like a philatelist or numismatist dealership.

It's not.

It's a by-appointment-only boutique with no signage or window displays and no racks to browse through for the clothes they apparently dealt in. Hannibal was greeted at the door by name and they're checked in like they were about to board a train by a very thin and elegant, grey-haired proprietress of indeterminate dynamic in a classic black pantsuit with a professional but warm smile. She whipped out a measuring tape and made her equally professional smiling beta assistant carry over the Brannock to measure his feet - *individually*, as everyone always has a slightly bigger and a slightly smaller foot - before having a muted conversation with Hannibal in what must have been coded English; he recognised the words, but it might as well been Greek.

There was a small selection of clothes brought over a few minutes later while he sat waiting uncomfortably on a sofa in a change room the size of his attic bedroom. He picked out some items that felt nice and were fairly neutral, because he would run out of clothes by tomorrow morning if he didn't take his pick - and it wouldn't be entirely against Hannibal's character if the alpha would just let him stay naked in the hotel suite tomorrow until laundry was done, because he'd find it amusing to have Will wear the consequences of his irrational defiance. Pun so fucking intended.

He didn't see any money change hands, but he had managed to stick his hand into Hannibal's pocket at some point and steal the handwritten receipt.

The items and sums were written in cursive with a flourish through the sevens and diagonal dashes through the zeros. They total to the five-digits range for five shirts, two pairs of trousers, two jackets, a scarf and a long wool coat in light charcoal. It's obscene and gave him heartburn.

On Friday, Hannibal presented him with a pair of leather oxfords in warm brown, sensible lace-ups that looked utterly unremarkable but felt different when he stepped into them and walked around experimentally. It's the human element maybe - someone had crafted this, stretched the treated skin out, cut it down to size, sculpted it, pricked it with a needle, joined everything together with thread and skill honed over years of focus and dedication. They're also individually sized.

His stomach ached in the present, in the car on the way to his new home, reminding him of its existence.

(That was another thing he was getting used to - being hungry almost all the time.)

"As soon as one is born, we are encouraged to fit in," sighed Hannibal with a faint air of ire, "Ready-made rules laid down with *no* input from us and then we're indoctrinated with only enough knowledge needed to take our place in the marketplace."

"Born to be consumers," murmured Will, and then because he could say it now, say it the way he *wanted* to say it and not have someone side-eye him because this alpha liked to quote *Crime and Punishment* at him randomly, "And to die, buried with all our worldly possessions."

Could hardly blame Hannibal's bias. Fyodor asked some damning questions…

Am I a monster or a victim?

He didn't miss any of his things, not really; but there's a frugal panicky child inside who wanted to hoard everything anyway and felt aggrieved at the absolute *unwarranted* relish that the alpha was getting from seeing him chuck his old life into the trash can.

Hannibal could have at least *pretended* to be sorry. But he didn't want *anything* in Will's life that wasn't tied to him and was *proud* of it.

Oh Will wasn't blind to that bit of alpha peacocking, how *could* he? It was wreathed in *tasteful Rococo Pink like a fucking flamingo*.

It should anger him. It *did*, but it served his purposes to reinvent himself so Will let it happen and then went out to eat an entire box of Twinkies, eating it directly outside the convenience store like a four-year old just to have Hannibal stand there holding the shredded wrappers he handed over, waiting politely for all to be aboard before he ferried the entire bundle into a bin; because this was Hannibal and littering was *rude* even if the trash was making his hands stink like artificial vanilla and heavily processed sugar; because he wanted to see the alpha *dying* on the inside because a seven-hundred dollar pair of new trousers were now *intimately* acquainted with the *disgusting* American sidewalk.

(It didn't escape his notice that he was constantly staggered between drowning in fog, finding everything hilarious or itching to cut someone's throat.)

There was some irritation but unfortunately Hannibal was more amused than dying - Will didn't know why he expected anything else, the guy was a *fucking psychiatrist* - and naturally, because life was unfair, the alpha had the last laugh when Will threw everything up an hour later.

Hannibal put him to bed and fed him *soup*; he had kept the carcass and bones from last night's boneless chicken fricassée, roasted it and made a master-stock overnight with a few sprigs of garlic chive and parsley, a single clove of garlic, then strained it to consommé to make a light soup of finely diced celery, carrot, a handful of minced brown onions and another of jasmine rice.

It's basically a light vegetable soup with homemade chicken stock. It's so delicious that Will's nose started to leak.

"I did a short course in soup-making during first winter break of my undergraduate," was Hannibal's smug reply when Will admitted that this was the best soup he had ever had in his entire life, *please* make it again.

"It's boring but I'd be happy to make it again - since you love it so much."

If this soup was boring sick people food and the other stuff was adequate, then Will wasn't sure what *interesting* would taste like.

Halfway through the first bowl, Hannibal began to recite Albert Camus in the original French, switching to English to explain so Will could link up the random nouns and verbs and conjugates he did know to the ones he didn't. Will didn't think he could ever speak the language but he would at least like to understand.

(His future alpha was a monster. A *taotie* who had swallowed and assimilated the brains and hand-eye coordination of a Michelin 3-star chef, the eyes and heart taken from a literature post-graduate at the Sorbonne, and the lips and tongue of a philosophy major at Humboldt University…)

Dave Graham had thought all the traditions stupid when given Will's old coat and other random things on the first Wednesday trip to Gulfport. He had saw it as more ridiculous alpha-omega leftovers from the bullshit that instigated the French to revolt, and wasn't shy about saying so. Will had suppressed his frustration on behalf of Hannibal's Franco-ancestors because the overthrown French nobility had been mostly beta at this point (because you know, beta was ironically the *dominant* chromosome… so if you didn't carefully curate your reproductive partners that's kind of where you would end up) and the new capitalist overlords had been mostly beta as well.

Hannibal at some point had helpfully reminded him that almost everyone turned a blind eye when the remaining French omegas departed en masse to escape the instability, more or less unmolested and often with their alpha spouses and gaggle of children in tow - *aegis* in action - so it didn't matter what Dave Graham had to say on the subject.

It didn't matter, because the best revenge was living on, and living well.

Or to quote, "To go wrong in one's own way is better than to go right in someone else's."

There's routine in his life, for all that it's in the process of being uprooted. Every evening, Hannibal medicated him with five ounces of whatever wine he picked for the day - Pinot Noir, Rose, Fiano…

The alpha may as well live on another planet; and hell, Will was about to become an astronaut.

"You like him, don't ya?" Miss Delia had asked on his last night at Laurie, an idle Thursday, blowing out a lungful of smoke as she did. The fumes slipped away in the wind rising up off the river. The light of New Orleans curved across her plump cheek as she searched his face for something.

Chin on a knee and hugging his legs, Will had looked across the expanse of dark streets, the intersection, crossing revellers, the cluster of lights, the distant gleam of the river and all the ships barely visible across the roofs, pressing the moment into his mind, letting it flow into the eddies of his memories to float and then to sink.

A respectful sea burial.

They were on the top balcony, a retreat that he shared, well, *had* shared, with two other omegas also living on the attic level. He glimpsed the reservations behind her questioning eyes and supposed that he hadn't gone about this courtship the right way; the other omegas would have told Miss Delia *every* glorious detail, progress reports from the first date to the first kiss to the moment when Will *knew*.

"He's an incredible cook," he had said while wearing a smile, because it's almost universal to like someone who could cook - and Hannibal even *liked* to cook, it wasn't a chore but a pleasure and some days even an *obsession*.

And then because he needed to dissuade her from looking too hard, "We went to Great Falls National Park when I was visiting him. He proposed while we were there."

Miss Delia had smiled, her face soft with sentiment as she finished off her cigarette, blowing the smoke away from him. She didn't ask what took him so long to actually respond to Hannibal Lecter's advances, if the proposal had happened before or *after* Will had used Hannibal's body to satisfy his urges and collected some DNA as a side benefit. She had her ideas about what happened and he would keep the truth to himself. Everyone's happy.

"And…"

And he was so assured of himself, so *clever, so charismatic; so everything* that people admired and desired and he lived so far, *oh so very far, far away,* in a city where no one gave a single *damn* about anything that happened down here in New Orleans.

"He's… easy to be with."

It sounded like an insult but it wasn't. He knew that he was supposed to say something about being at peace, or feeling like he was *safe*, but that was a level of subterfuge beyond him. Hannibal Lecter was *not* safe. It was his recommendation really - he was an intellectual deviant when placed next to the local psychiatrists that Will had met in the course of his work.

"I have a particular distaste for the American education system below college level. No one is taught to truly think, simply to replicate, applauded for mastering tests and exams with confirmed acceptable answers," huffed Hannibal, shaking his head in disappointment, "Now I can accept there is little leeway in mathematics and science, that at the foundational level it requires one to commit data to memory without analysis. But it's shocking to me that once that data is there, it remains there with no one trying to examine it for its weight or dimensions. It sits unchanged in the consciousness and gradually compacts, leaving one with a mind weighed down by detritus and not much else."

Compacts like fecal matter, minds full of bullshit and not much else.

Hannibal had a way with words.

Will let out a snort of laughter he had to quickly cover up because his brain zigged to the left as it does without his permission and he imagined a voice that might be Hannibal's say with all the irony in the world:

I went from digging out to fecal impaction in the body to digging out fecal impaction in the brain. I love my job some days. I still prefer the latter, less offensive to the senses, even if it pains my soul to be confronted with more idiocy than pathology…

In the car, he forgot for a moment that he was terrified deep down in his soul despite climbing aboard this ship willingly; a deep disquiet he couldn't shake off because he was in a unknown city with an alpha he had met less than a year ago and the only persons who might cry at his funeral were over a thousand miles away if Hannibal Lecter was secretly planning to murder him. For a moment Will forgot about everything and focused on self-control, because he didn't want to laugh and ruin the *scholarly* atmosphere.

"You like him, don't ya?" Miss Delia had asked.

As an omega there was only one answer. As himself, well… he was asking that question too, every damn day when Hannibal *messed* with him, fed him ridiculously delicious food that sometimes looked like sculpture, administered his 5 ounces of daily tonic and was generally a bad influence.

Will like the man underneath the charm and fussy clothes who would start a conversation about Proust and end up somewhere near Murakami and *Fortress Besieged* then relate some tidbit about Aristotle or Diogenes and then go on about some French guy from 1500s named Étienne de la Boétie who somehow links in with Gandhi's ideals before abruptly asking him if he felt like red or white or maybe pink for a change.

(It left him breathless sometimes; it felt like dancing and spinning with nothing but words.)

That Hannibal was an alpha was just a wonderful coincidence or accident of fate; Will won't be looking this gift horse in the mouth.

Miss Delia had stroked a fond hand along his cheek, thumbing at the creases of the small smile distorting his mouth.

"We never run out of things to say to each other," he added, because this was a fact he could swear an oath to.

Seriously, hand him a Bible, any edition would do.

(More French and West European than East though he could technically trace his blood in all four cardinals; Catholic some days, often, or when it suits him; sometimes more Deist than Theist and sometimes the other way around; then every month, once, he descends into Buddhism, philosophically speaking; and since the Pope said you can't be a pious Catholic and a Buddhist philosopher then he must also be a heretic, no, he definitely is, he likes a little heresy, good for the soul…)

Will didn't understand it, was still taken aback by it, but the alpha had a forthright quality to his being that he found grounding; he could say things he's *never* said to anyone else and Hannibal Lecter would never find it weird or alarming, because the alpha was a little weird and a bit alarming himself. Their conversations, all its twists and curves, were the highlight of all their time together.

Well, besides the food.

His last supper in New Orleans included crawfish étouffée. Yeah, that *goop*, somehow got reshaped from a goopy mess into what might be *arancini* fusion, and looked way too neat and lovely before he broke the rice pyramid up and demolished it.

It's too early for crawfish season by a fortnight, the truly good stuff that was, but Hannibal knew a guy who knew a guy.

Will liked the man, for a definition of *like* - was fond of him, intrigued by him, holding a certain affection, possessing a level of tolerance, indulgence, on a good day anyway, and on bad days, *well*…

Yesterday, he literally had to place an embargo on thought experiments involving killing someone. He really shouldn't have opened that can of worms by letting Hannibal distract him with a thought experiment the first time…

At the thought, he couldn't help a little snort then shook his head, exercising his right to use NO against the madness of this *intellectual deviant*.

Hannibal glanced over in the car, a question in his smile. Yeah, *nope*, no way in hell. Last thing Will wanted was to set that ball rolling again…

(He had enough of killing. It's what got him here.)

”Have you heard of Franceanne Glessner-Lee?”

You couldn’t be *omega* and study anything related to criminology, forensics or legal medicine without someone mentioning her, the First Omega of American Forensics.

The alpha wanted to take him to the Maryland Medical Coroners’ Office to see the Glessner-Lee murder dioramas; those little dollhouses full of handcrafted miniatures which had gone from an omega pastime of leisure into educational set pieces utilised for instructing trainees on how to notice and record crime scene details. They were closed over the winter or Hannibal would have already taken him. Will wasn’t sure if he actually wanted to go but it made him hopeful that the man was so open about his career choice, which was on the crazier end of careers taken up by betas nevermind omegas.

It was enough to be content.

He might even be happy.

(When he wasn’t angry. Or confused. Or bereft. Or scared. And hungry, always hungry…)

To be honest, and he was trying to be honest, it was no longer about him. There was going to be a *tiny* vulnerable human being arriving about September or October who would need him to be certain of what he was doing, where he was going, *need so many things* and he couldn’t do it alone; the momentum of his choices were now utterly unavoidable.

Against his will, he felt a sharp stab of sadness, a memory from his very first week working at the precinct rising to float upon the murk of his conscience. There had been a call from a pharmacy, requesting they arrest a shoplifter - a sixteen-year old beta stealing prenatal vitamins.

Will had watched the proceedings of the arrest with a detached air but behind his eyes, he felt the anguish and the humiliation wracking that girl slither into his very being; no one asked her why she was stealing prenatal vitamins and how she came to need them.

He had logged off work that day and donated twenty bucks from his thin wallet to a charity for such matters, and then another twenty from his first paycheque and every other paycheque.

It felt like he was paying off a blackmailer but it was a bribe he was willing to pay.

He didn’t have income now, wouldn’t have his own income for years if Hannibal had anything to say about it, so the alpha was just going to have to suck it up when Will pilfered Jacksons from him every week. Hannibal could afford it, probably could afford being pilfered everyday on the hour and still afford his champagne and cashmere - heavens, it was so *obscene how much there was*; but Will didn’t want to descend into kleptomania, so he’ll pay it back just… *not* with money.

“It’s alarming to me how little situational intelligence is valued here,” continued Hannibal, “We live in uncertain times, and yet if we don’t have means to engage in extracurricular learning, regular classes only teaches one to master artificial tests of memorisation.”

No one was taught what to do when in the middle of a war of invasion and occupation by post-Bismarcks, the post-Russkayas came to help you regain your territory - only to turn around and invade and occupy.

Or when the People's Commissar ruled in favour of mandatory reeducation and prison camps after all.

"Allowing yourself to be circumscribed to a regular scholastic education would only set you up for failure in our chaotic world," Hannibal turned to look at him with an imploring smile, then murmured as an aside, as a mild tender entreaty; "I want to teach my children to think and be free."

Will stared back at the hope of that smile being welded at him. He had been wondering in the back of his mind what the point of this entire carefully-steered dialogue was about since Hannibal had managed to stay on topic more or less, when he usually leaped all over the place like a bronco with a vengeance.

(It was only the **one** right now. He had only committed to the *one*, his get-out-jail-free *one*.

How many did Hannibal say he wanted again? Three? *Four*?

No, this alpha could *work* for the other ones - Will wasn't doing it just because *he* wanted it.

Will had plans for this life.

Like buying a gun.

He was not going to go through being paralyzed for thirty to ninety days three to four times without a gun.)

The alpha reached across and unfastened a button on his coat, slipping a hand under to splay across the flat abdomen. Will inched back from the invasive touch, clutching at the appendage before remembering that he was supposed to welcome it.

"It's only been eight weeks, you can't feel anything."

"I know."

But the alpha had enjoyed the gesture of attachment anyway. Will turned back to gazing out the window, his discomfort mixing together with his hidden apprehension and his fatigue into the perfect downer.

"Are you tired?"

Was the sky blue?

He felt wilted and somehow unclean.

"We'll be there shortly."

The alpha leaned into him and took an audible breath, mouth pressed high on the side of Will's neck, just under his jaw. It felt both strange and strangely good. Will's eyes fluttered close as a shadow of him peered out at them from the rear-view mirror.

In the living room, he stood in the middle of the new furnishings and stared at the mounted screwhorn antelope head, whose dark gaze followed him as he walked from one corner to the other and back. The walls had been dressed with art taken from storage and dusted off for their new dwelling; three small paintings, portraits of ancestors or ancestral relatives; a few copies of known works painted in those 19th century Parisian art studios dedicated to producing quality home furnishings for the discerning decorator.

Did Will know that at some point almost all artists engaged in the occasional copy-painting? Michelangelo had, Monet even did it for money, even Picasso did so a few times but that's because he couldn't just walk out of the Louvre with his favorite pieces.

On an adjacent wall, framed black and white photographs of vaulted church ceilings, sculpture gardens, and a Mesopotamian relief carving provided a contrast. The clear glass encasements reflected a blurry outline of Will as he moved around, looking at what was going to be his new home and wondering if he could get something less…whatever this style of decor that Hannibal went for - *less* severe, maybe?

The tuxedo sofa was upholstered with heavy jacquard and had matching bolster cushions at each arm. Tentatively he sat down and found it was actually a real sofa and quite plush, not a set piece.

He got comfortable and stared at the pointy gothic hall chairs flanking the fireplace. For chairs, they were uninviting, their form at complete odds with their designed function. They were clearly antiques, *historical*, the kind that should be in a museum or castle. He wondered if Hannibal would move them somewhere else when the time came - surely no one wanted anyone to teeth on three-hundred year old linseed oil-treated oak. His attention drifted back to the photo of the carving, a man having his throat ripped out by a lioness, some nebulous sensation rising beneath his breast bone like a whooping cry.

"I hope you don't mind, I've invited Sabine for dinner."

And if I do mind?

The alpha's senior by more than a decade, Hannibal had met Sabine Le Vert-Beaufremont over a glass of champagne at a charity gala. Being both ex-residents of La Ville-Lumière with a shared love of the cultural arts, they'd become allies. Hannibal intended for her to step in and accompany him during the acclimation to Baltimore society. Her husband was a noted architect whose work required travel, making her an experienced hand in the subtle art of winning friends and influencing people in whatever city or country she happened to land in. She had three children – all alphas to her everlasting exasperation - with the eldest being a mere two years younger than Will.

And if he liked her after spending a week or two with her, she would be his Honorable Omega for the ceremony, whatever the hell that meant. Hannibal was fairly sure that he would like her.

“I think red wine prunes paired with cinnamon ice cream for dessert,” continued the alpha, circling behind him with a tray of green tea.

The good thing about his state was that you could escape almost anything simply by saying you were tired.

Will took a quick shower and slid under the covers of the master bed, intending to roll around and maybe riffle through a bedside drawer, get used to things because for all that they had done together, this was his first time in the master bedroom. Except that’s not what happened; lulled by the indelible marks of the alpha’s scent everywhere, he’s asleep when his head touched the pillow. When he woke several hours later, the windows were dark, gnarled tree branches with hints of spring reduced to slender shadows. Someone had switched on the gas fireplace so it was comfortable and an outfit had been laid out on the ottoman at the foot of the bed.

He heard them before he saw them.

Downstairs seated adjacent to her host, Sabine Beaufremont was delicately slathering chicken liver parfait onto a small triangle of toast, her scrunched eyes glittering as she chuckled at something the alpha said. When he entered at a slow unsteady gait, they fell quiet, reminding him of something he would rather forget; arriving late on his first day of class.

Always the new kid at school, always the stranger…

The memory burst into mist when the woman broke into a broad smile, rose to her feet and swept aside the chair all in one effortless graceful movement. *A dancer, ballet, traditional and modern* - was all he had time to pick out before she approached with a melodramatic flourish of her skirts.

“Will, I have heard so much about you, come, come - oh Hannibal, how dare you keep him all to yourself.”

The alpha ducked his head in graceful acquiescence at the accusation.

Sabine Le Vert-Beaufremont beheld him with a radiant smile before she drew him in and kissed him on both cheeks in a burst of cheer, then wiped away her lipstick stain with a thumb and mouth waggle of mischief. Her scent was an alluring garland of ripe muskmelon, decadent nectarines and rose damask, her warmth a gentle steady heat.

A dainty mole just off-center from the middle of her forehead and her short curls swept to one side with a hint of gray at one temple, the omega was mid-to-late forties, effortlessly elegant in slightly lustrous black, something made from a poly-fibre in a traditional cut that nevertheless managed to feel space-age, the fine lines around her eyes or lips adding to her aura. Will felt almost mesmerized because this was a different kind of self-possession to the dominance of alphas; it was a soft, somehow seductive sense of knowing one’s place in the world.

Her hand was barely there on his arm but she still managed to steer him in his half-dazed state to the chair next to her, smiling at him in conspiracy when Hannibal pointed out how

there's a place prepared for Will - next to him.

"My God, Hannibal, have some shame," She rolled her eyes, delighted because finally at last, she had the satisfaction of seeing her younger friend undone.

There was also actual business to discuss with Will so shoo, go bring us some lemon tea or a round of canapés, go on, be useful. She ordered Hannibal around with the good humor of a close older cousin or aunt.

"Now I know this is sudden, but I thought you would like to have more time to sleep on it; we need to pick your five witnesses for the *confarreatio*," she began, breezing over the term, "preferably by Thursday."

Will blinked, about to look away before it seared his eardrums and then he couldn't look away.

Confarreatio.

A snarl of nausea that might be anxiety tore its way through his guts, leaving burst pipes in its wake.

Most of the RSVPs had come back, including the invitations left at Laurie House, tallying up to just over two-hundred; a very small reception, the alpha hastened to add when Will swung his gaze over to stare down the man who had chucked his clothes in the trash can last week.

Indeed, Sabine Beaufremont expected at least five-hundred considering Hannibal's extensive social circle; but Hannibal refused to hold the reception anywhere except a *respectable* place like a library or a gallery, and the Peabody limited the numbers to about two-hundred.

Will had no idea it was possible to know that many people.

She laughed but not unkindly, "Your Hannibal is very charming."

Guilty as charged, the alpha gave a sanguine shrug then left the room to *fetch* as commanded. Will felt the urge to find where Hannibal kept his kettle, and test for himself if it's hardy enough to withstand impact with the man's head.

It was customary to invite the extended family - though only two maternal uncles could make it, a few cousins were coming with their spouses. And an aunt, Hannibal added when he returned with a jug of lemon tea, Aunt Adalgisa didn't RSVP because she never has to; her duty was to record every birth, attend every mating and notarise all deaths, and would only contact him if she was omitting herself by sending a replacement.

They would be flying in from Italy four days prior to the ceremony; a second cousin and two of his cousins once-removed were also attending - Bianca who was only four years Will's senior and little Piermaria and baby Cherubina were teens. Hannibal grew very fond of them and they him when he visited Italy in 92, they'd been only little, but they had been fond to the point where these two still remembered Hannibal.

Invitations had been extended to a select few of Hannibal's old classmates at Johns Hopkins, his post-graduate supervisor, fellow post-graduates whom he kept in touch with, select department heads at the hospital, ex-colleagues he had personally worked with in ER, close peers and mentors of the psychiatric community.

Then there were the prominent families, alpha-omega clans who had been here in Maryland or Virginia for generations and lent their names to libraries, gardens and public buildings, local *vieux riche* whom took Hannibal as one of their own (and whose very dead distant relatives were probably the generous patrons of Will's education since he was eleven); and then one had to also account for the head of the Symphony board plus a few members; a friend or four made through the opera; the chef de cuisine of four notable restaurants Hannibal regularly visited for ideas as much as the food; the museum and gallery curators who authenticated several paintings, sculptures, and miscellaneous knick-knacks in the Lecter family collection…

There were crossovers between some social groups but it still tallied up. Similarly, Will could invite whom he wished but of course, it's understood that not everyone could travel.

A nice way of saying not everyone had money or time for this farce.

Plus the headcount limits meant the tables were basically full… If there was a need, Hannibal was open to a second reception - oh *like hell*, having one was already testing the limits of Will's sanity.

Did he have an opinion on floral arrangements? Did he want a bouquet? Sabine Le-Vert had gone traditional and had delicate paper flowers on her *pelerine* for guests to purloin, but if he opted for a tuxedo then a bouquet was the better option. He could veto the bouquet entirely - it was a rather *beta* thing to do, wasn't it? Well, they couldn't have the guests hunt down a rabbit or shoot a duck because this was not the hills of Lombardy but maybe a simple ribbon-pull with an opal pendant on the end for the lucky person?

Will felt his brows pinch because *what*?

They had narrowed down the photographers to three possibilities, waiting upon Will's decision after he'd seen the portfolios - an answer was required preferably before Thursday after.

"And of course, the music and the cake…" concluded Sabine Beaufremont, voice dropping off into nothing as she studied his face. With a kind smile, she placed a hand on his arm and gently squeezed.

"Hannibal," she called, leaning back to the doorway but never looking away from him, her eyes warm and comforting.

When Will returned after the bathroom trip, the alpha was resetting the table, lights off and candles lit. The half-empty goblets and plates of canapés were gone and replaced by china rimmed in navy and gold and tumblers with a heavy wide triangular base. The plates looked newer, sharply modern against the previous set, without a single hint of fluting or flourishes.

The music had been changed from a merry string quartet to a hushed piano cello duet that ebbed and flowed with the flicker and glow of the flames.

Will sat down at one of the place settings, “Where’s Sabine?

The alpha slid the cutlery into place, “She thought you would appreciate a quieter evening.”

From the corner of his eye, Will noted a new occupant of the dining room wall since he was here beginning of January; a still-life spread of freshly slaughtered pheasant, duck and sparrow, plumage full with rich teal, bone white, chestnut, licorice and pomegranate, complimented by a spill of cotton flowers, clustered berries and grapes gleaming like jewels from a silver soup tureen. The mantle remained empty of any displays, an expectant emptiness.

He reached for the jug, “Didn’t mean to run her off.”

The alpha reached for it at the same time, their hands sliding past one another, “You didn’t.”

Will grabbed the handle of the jug and poured his own lemon tea, pointedly ignoring the gesture. The alpha stared at him, his mouth pursed with as much bewilderment as amusement before turning on his heel to fetch the trolley lurking by the other doorway.

“Confit lamb shank in thyme jus with a side of pommes aligot.”

Hannibal laid the plate out before him, navy and gold double rims of plate and charger framing the shank of lamb, slathered in a dark maroon sauce that bled sluggishly upon a pillow of creamy potato puree. In the mellow candlelight, two buds of trimmed bone peaked out like severed aortic arches.

“Garlic potato mash?”

”Yes, you mentioned that you haven’t had that in awhile.”

You haven’t had it since the last time you were here in Baltimore, was what he meant.

Will picked up his cutlery and slid the serrated blade easily through the stump of meat that really did look weirdly like an anatomical heart to his fatigued eyes. It’s delicious enough to draw a breath from him, though he didn’t know why he was still surprised at how good it was considering Hannibal’s culinary prowess. The alpha was hardly subtle in his intent to fatten him up.

“I may have gotten ahead of myself,” Hannibal sat, shaking out a cloth napkin.

Well, his first reaction to actually making wedding planning decisions was barfing, so they were both having an off day.

“I shouldn’t have presumed.”

“About what?”

Hannibal studied him in the low glow of candlelight and Will realized he *liked* the indecision on the alpha's face. *After indecision comes unease, which so easily ebbs into dread*, a voice he didn't quite recognise whispered inside his head.

He put down his cutlery and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to drive off the sudden ambush of *meanness* that came over him.

Oh he had heard the term before: *confarreatio*, an iron-clad union with implications that scared off the contemporary beta psyche too used to no-fault-divorces.

It was an *ancient* marriage contract with an in-built prenuptial agreement before the concept of a prenup entered public consciousness. Technically it was to *his benefit*, since he could take over Hannibal's title if he thought the man was doing a terrible job of running their life and relegate the alpha to being a viscount if his family had that in the attic wings, or make him *alpha consort* if they didn't.

Confarreatio was probably how a German Princess named Sophie became Catherine, Tsarina, ousting her mate, you know, the actual heir to the Russian throne within a year of his ascension.

That was the power of *confarreatio*, one could force an abdication and take over an empire because this alpha was obviously too stupid to live.

It was probably why the betas tended to avoid it... The strange power imbalance probably confused them.

He didn't know people still used this antiquated form of marriage. He didn't know this was even still *legally applicable*. But it must not be that strange to *astronauts* because Sabine didn't even hiccup on it; she probably had her own *confarreatio* contract on vellum all framed up and under a spotlight.

(Would it be calf-skin or cotton?)

It gave him a lot of rights to this or that which didn't apply in America or the current century, but it also gave him access to all of Hannibal's *everything*; money, property, shares, non-tangible assets like *intellectual property*, even the Lecter Trust.

It was just short of giving him the power to sign Hannibal up for a vasectomy.

(Something inside of him literally curdled in horror at the thought that just serrated through his consciousness from out of the darkness. But then he calmed, grew thoughtful.)

He had been realistic, had put his thinking caps on since handing over his keys for Laurie and his room on Thursday night to Miss Delia.

When Hannibal walked him back to the suite at the boutique hotel on Friday evening, having done his last round of the streets he had gotten used to seeing as his place, led by hand to his last supper in the City that Care Forgot, it occurred to him there had to be a Family Trust, because these families needed to pass on their accumulation of moats and forts, artworks,

antique furniture, books and jewels without having the modern invention of death taxes bankrupting their next-in-line.

Hannibal definitely didn't buy most of the stuff in the house, which was basically an empty husk except for the kitchen and dining room in January, especially the antiques and paintings - hardly the stuff you can pick up with a quick trip to IKEA - so the only *fiscally sane* option was the alpha took them out from storage and they'd go back there one day when Hannibal was dust (when *they* were dust) for the next person bearing the surname of Lecter (someone with *Will's* blood running through her or his veins, perhaps carrying the *phenotype* for his blue-adjacent eyes) who wanted Svarnas Lecter staring down at them from a painting by J. Malczewski in the lounge.

But it also meant no divorce.

Ever.

Unless he dragged Hannibal's reputation through the mud and had him thrown into prison.

Or killed him.

Killed himself or had him killed, whichever.

It was a vow that meant what it said; they couldn't leave each other unless one of them was in chains or buried.

Will swallowed, took up his knife and a forkful of the mash and then another. He hadn't realised it upon waking from his nap, but he was starving.

"I taste raisins, apricots, cinnamon… cardamom, cumin, ginger, cloves, thyme… and something else - don't recognise it."

Hannibal smiled down at his plate, his nonplussed acceptance of these occasional spats of pettiness being one of those things that made Will accept the state of affairs.

"Anise star, more commonly associated with asian cuisine, and," Hannibal smiled meaningfully, "A sprinkle of saffron."

"Saffron," Will examined the meat caught upon his fork for a brief moment before he ate it; savoury flesh melted in his mouth and burst in a rich array of flavours. Saffron was one of the most expensive spices in the world, used in natural remedies for thousands of years.

"I may actually enjoy health supplements if they all taste like this."

Hannibal smiled down at the plate, savoring the pleasure of having been seen through with his usual false modesty; "Yes, a uniquely layered flavor profile."

Will swallowed his dinner, "It's also a poison."

The alpha paused mid-bite then cocked his head like the smartass he was; "Anything could become a poison in excess. One could die of too much oxygen."

Fair.

“And violin could be described as merely scratching cat entrails with horse hair.”

Hannibal raised his eyes and gave him a delighted smile, like Will just quoted poetry which caught him off-guard because he was still being *mean* here, *he was being mean*. Their eyes met across the table and he broke first, flushing at what he had seen in the man’s dark gaze.

“It’s delicious, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Hannibal, sounding a little breathless.

Will smiled awkwardly down at his plate, put down his knife to rub the heat coming up his nape then took a mouthful of the potato mash. The lamb was still delicious but it was harder to enjoy now that the alpha was staring at him like he was prime rib.

Will put down his knife and took a large gulp of the tea, drained it and then switched to water, filling his glass up to the brim from the other jug. It’s not enough.

Like he could read his mind, Hannibal leaned sideways to reach for something under the trolley and stood with a decanter.

“Your daily medication against madness,” he poured the wine with enviable ease and a smile.

“What am I drinking?”

The alpha leaned across the table to place the wine before him, a whisper of glass on wood; “Cabernet Sauvignon, with notes of tobacco leaf, plum sauce, blackberries and anise.”

Will took his medication, all five ounces of it in slow moderate sips, thimbles of sanguine red punctuated by mouthfuls of lamb.

It drew another little sigh because somehow the lamb was even better, yes, *better*; *how* could it be more delicious? Was it even human?

Hannibal finished eating first, because his portion has been much smaller to account for the grazing earlier. He didn’t stand and start to clean up but continued staring across the table until Will felt like he must have cobwebs on his face. It got progressively more awkward and his neck got progressively warmer until he was almost fidgeting in his seat, but he didn’t speed up or slow down, because the food couldn’t be disrespected like that.

“Can I interest you in a distraction?”

Will cleared his throat as he wiped his mouth, finally finished.

“*No* thought experiments.”

“How about a thought crime?” Asked Hannibal innocently, in a way that wasn’t innocent at all.

He stared for a long breathless beat at this monster who had clearly not only swallowed a French literature post-doctorate but had also apparently been snacking on an English lit student from Cambridge and burst into breathless laughs he barely managed to hold back.

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

”Thought crime?” Hannibal smiled serenely, like he didn’t know that he just *butchered* “*1984”* by making that term into a euphemism.

“Mr. Orwell is coming back from the dead, so he can murder you in your sleep,” he pointed out then bit his lip because this *wasn’t* funny; Will wasn’t going to smile, that book had *haunted* him during sophomore year and he would *never* find it funny - this alpha *wasn’t* funny.

Hannibal was, naturally, relentless; ”I have extremely criminal thoughts about you all the time.”

Will shook his head because *no*, he was not going to add *sexual* advances to their constant dialogue of literature references. He knew what Hannibal wanted and he *wasn’t* going to say it, he *wasn’t*.

”I am exercising my right to say *no* to this absurdity.”

Hannibal said it anyway, practically beaming, “I’ll be waiting for my crime’s punishment, Will.”

Will Graham gave up on self-control and almost slid down right off his chair.

Fuck this intellectual deviant.

Later*, much, much later,* when the fireplace was dimming, they crawled out from under the dining table, cleared the table and did basic washing up, then sat down again like civilised people to eat dessert.

Hannibal ate red wine prunes with cinnamon ice cream, while Will got the pear variant, because he just ate lamb shank and may have unbalanced his inner Yin-Yang and the pears would rebalance him.

Hannibal never consumed a traditional Chinese herbalist, but he had one on call. These physicians of old had always made a decent living since the first time one of them were exiled into the wilds of the western plains, then taken to Rome in chains. Though primarily herbalists, they gave excellent care to every dynamic, omega, alpha or beta, male or female, having done long sometimes multi-generational observations of the human physique, recorded down their insights as scriptures and prescriptions, discovered herbs, spices, proteins, made tinctures and potions, all centuries before the birth of clinical medicine.

When they’re in bed later, Hannibal turned to him and rolled forward until Will could feel his breath on the side of his neck, making him twitch a shoulder in discomfort.

“I want them to know the rules are far less rigid than the world presents them as,” Hannibal whispered, because being so clever, he had noticed the unspoken ban on the B word and the main C word, not to mention other variations like the other C word, *both* of the I words, the P word, *both* of them, even the K word. Naturally also the E and F words, but due to wide-spread application, he couldn’t separate out the Y words. He wasn’t sure about the J word but he was also putting it into the ban pile for now.

Will knew he would eventually have to exonerate those words but not this month. Not today, not tomorrow and certainly not tonight.

“Einstein revolutionized physics after he transcended the conventional rules of science; he opened his eyes to what exists rather than allow himself to become blinded by what was established to pre-exist.”

“*Einstein*?” Will huffed in quiet laughter, his discomfort at the reference to the bundle of rapidly dividing cells making outrageous demands on his body offset by the earnest hope coming from this intellectual deviant of humanities next to him, “High bar to reach.”

“Just an example; Wassily Kandinsky?”

Will hummed in the darkness, his smile and his worries hidden, an entire ocean wavering and swaying just above the ceiling, threatening to engulf the room.

“Let’s settle for just being alive.”

There’s a hum of thought and then an agreeable, “Alive is good.”

Will Graham turned away on his side and fell asleep.

“Will woke up from deep sleep crying last night.”

Bedelia Du Maurier paused, her hands frozen mid-motion upon her jacket, about to reach for her notebook.

“Did something happen?”

“He had a dream.”

She quickly flipped her notebook open, pen already moving, “A dream or a nightmare?”

Hannibal was thoughtful, mouth pursing for a few seconds as he mulled over his words.

“Perhaps a nightmare… made into a dream.”

“Tell me about it.”

Her colleague inhaled as if to prepare for some epic; “In the dream, we were at the store, he put a bottle of wine in the basket because he was curious about it.”

Seemed innocuous enough.

“And then what happened?”

“I came back from the delicatessen and apparently told him that the wine was terrible, that he should let me pick - then I pointed out that his lack of viticulture knowledge made him a terrible judge of wine… apparently this happened in public. We had an audience. Then he woke up.”

And apparently bothered enough to be in tears, an extreme reaction in light of his regular behaviour. She surmised it to be a lapse in judgment due to the late hour. Despite his overwhelming empathy, young Will was apparently not expressive, having a generally introverted air.

There was silence for a moment, heavy with curiosity and uncertainty on Hannibal’s side and more startled caution on hers. This dream sounded like…

“You humiliated him.”

Hannibal frowned, his brows pinching and shifting, something that might be the first expression of disquiet she has ever witnessed. The expression sat on his face, finding a niche somewhere between confusion and irritation.

“It’s a dream.”

Maybe. Or maybe good Will’s subconscious was finally picking up enough warning signs to warn him that he was about to make a terrible mistake.

“Dreams can be prophetic,” she reminded him dryly, because let neither of them forget that Will was omega, a being considered by the ancients to be born closest to attaining the mysteries of life and death, instruments of gods despite their mortality.

Hannibal blinked then frowned, almost offended.

“I would never humiliate him.”

Once again she wondered how it was possible for her colleague to be one of the most self-aware persons of her acquaintance and yet also the blindest.

Lecter was a *self-professed* sadist of indeterminate categorisation among the finer points of currently profiled sadism, enjoying his little perpetrations of humiliation upon his peers, alphas or otherwise, by consistently being smarter, faster and stronger, along with being more well-read, more accomplished, better attired and a good orator. One of his goals in life was to be literally the best at something anytime he stood in a room, giving his respect to only those who were also the best at something or possessed general high competency, or who were self-aware enough to be humble. Omegas usually fell into the latter group. Everyone else was scheduled for regular inoculations of humiliation.

“Do you remember your colleague, Doctor Collins?”

“Of course, Patricia is a friend.”

“Where is she now?”

“She is serving out a renewed contract with Médecins Sans Frontières,” beamed the man, like he was genuinely pleased for this old colleague from his surgeon days.

She raised a critical eyebrow, her smile tight, “Do you remember why she left?”

Hannibal Lecter raised an eyebrow back, like she was now just being deliberately obtuse - *her… obtuse!*

“To discover herself, naturally.”

Her tight smile thinned to the verge of unpleasantness at this trite response. She made a swift recovery of her usual disdain for this peculiar colleague of hers.

“You seduced her fiancé,” she enunciated each word slowly.

“He was a liar, both to her and to himself,” the rejoinder came swiftly, served with a smile.

She didn’t snort. “You, her, fiancé.”

The man looked idly down at the fingernails on his right hand, “She’s a friend I care for. It would have been an unfulfilling marriage if it wasn’t a short one.”

Some days, *some days*, she experienced a truly diabolical urge to crack open his skull and see if there was a gravity well or perhaps a neutron star hidden inside that would fling out the occasional burst of *highly dangerous radiation.*

Her mouth tilted up, voice as dry as chemical desiccant, “You called him a *worm*.”

“It was hard to overlook his invertebrate qualities,” sighed Lecter, utterly unapologetic about his detachment to what was merely an episode of ancient history, “but I cared about her and was willing to take the hit.”

Her eyes almost rolled right out of her head. This *thing* wearing the mask of a man… It took several deep silent controlled breaths to hold back her sneer.

What *friend*? He did it to see what would happen. He did out of *sick* curiosity, to see how his high-flying alpha female colleague would feel to discover her fiancé *fetishised* her dynamic and would have been happy with any alpha that gave him attention - and she was chosen because out of the *available* alphas at the hospital, the rest of them were alpha males and in a similar vein to Hannibal Lecter, impenetrable and highly selectively regarding who received their time. Even if their aura of dominance was a step above Patricia Collins, the *invertebrate* was as much afraid of them as attracted to them.

Hannibal Lecter had been contemptuous of his friend's urge for *connection*, *contemptuous* of her efforts to compromise for the sake of a *beta*, contemptuous of her *compromising* at all, and disgusted with the *object* of these efforts. The fiancé could have been female, male, older, younger, white or black or Polynesian; Hannibal would have still done it and enjoyed a good show.

"Imagine how Collins felt in that moment when you told her."

Lecter regarded her with a strange look, "Relieved of course, as she won't be wasting her precious time or energy on something doomed for failure."

"Humiliated," she corrected gently, voice as mild as she could temper it before it became a whisper; because this alpha only accepted censure on a good day and they would get nowhere if he started getting smart and snippy.

"I invited them to dinner," Lecter didn't roll his eyes, his gaze remaining dead on her face but it's in his intonation, the deliberate pacing in his words, "and I broke the news very respectfully, without an audience."

"You told her that her fiancé, who was seated next to her, had sex with you; and that if she wanted to make things *even*, you were open to *helping*."

There was a heavy silence that engulfed the office, a moment when it seemed that she had truly annoyed him. But then Hannibal Lecter smiled, a small teasing twitch of his lips.

"Now that I'm older, I've come to realize I may have jumped the gun in my accusations - he was a rather fast shot once I turned him over my knee. It may not count, since I was fully dressed."

There was a vague awareness in the back of her mind that this conversation was absurd. But then she came to her senses, remembered who she was talking to and accepted it with all the sardonic aplomb of Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier, regularly featured in the American Journal of Abnormal Psychology and a consultant of pharmaceutical companies researching antipsychotic medications.

His *authenticity* of feeling, his desire for connection with Will Graham had temporarily hoodwinked her. Not anymore, she vowed - while he could put down his delusions of grandeur in the name of love, she had to *always remember* what he was capable of.

This was the *real* Hannibal Lecter, not whatever beautiful chicanery was being fed to young Will.

"You told her after. Why didn't you *stop* before things went that far? You could have warned her."

"So she can claim lack of evidence and continue her denial?" Lecter huffed, derisive, then heaved a weary sigh, standing up to idly swing his arms like he needed to mobilise his joints or warm up for surgery, "I don't see how this has anything to do with what we were discussing."

If it didn't have something to do with Will Graham, it was *boring*; that was Lecter's motto now.

This child.

"I am trying to explain humiliation."

"I know what it is."

She barely managed to stifle her snort, "You have only ever been an observer of it."

And an inflictor of it.

Walking to her wide study desk to pick up the prepared decanter of wine, Lecter held it up under his nose to check the brewing aroma at its lip.

"I have pledged myself to Will, everyone else is inconsequential."

Dedicated monogamy did not balance the scales when it came to Lecter's pathologies.

She took a long breath and shifted back in her seat, crossed her legs, tried to reconsider how she might wrangle some semblance of progress.

Straight to the quick then.

"You called Will ignorant."

That got a sharp reaction. The decanter went back on the desk with a solid thunk.

"That was a *dream*, I would never denigrate Will, publicly or privately. He is…" and there it was, the expression that shocked her every time, "He could be my equal."

Or at least the closest heaven and hell would allow, in giving Lecter someone who would understand him, one day, in all his brilliance, pettiness, and vileness.

Her pen looped and slashed to write the words 'sensitive psychopathic alpha' and 'romantic sadist' while her professionalism cringed.

But there were no words for what he was.

Or Will Graham was just that good at fondling the man's brain. An anecdote came to mind, how the two had been chatting in bed then the omega had replied, offhand and sleepy, a melancholy observation - 'joys are electrifying but my sorrows disembowel.'

Hannibal's expression had been so painfully besotted during the narration that she'd been tempted to hand him a tissue.

"If Will went out right now and bought a wine, *any wine*, I would appreciate his effort."

"You would," realised Bedelia Du Maurier, wondering when she would stop suffering blows of dissonance.

Hannibal would love a *gift* of wine from Will, even if he would rather pour it down the sink than drink it in the scenario that a plague wiped out all planted vitis viniferas and it was the last bottle of wine on earth. He would store the bottle as a *memento*, as proof that Will Graham wandered past a wine shop and thought about him, cared about him enough to grab something, pay for it and bring it home to him.

“Hannibal, this dream isn’t actually about you.”

Her colleague reached for the decanter and rolled it on its own axis, scenting the nose again after the gentle stir.

“Will lives with an overwhelming amount of fear,” she let her words trail off until he looked at her again; “Fear is the basis of distrust; he may feel that this is all too good to be true.”

Her calculated comment did its job, Hannibal seemed pleased at the idea that he was being a good alpha for his lovely Will.

“*The basis of all human fears… a door, slightly ajar...*” Hannibal quoted and put the decanter down, far more gently this time.

“As much as we would like it to be logical, minds are complex, not easily solved; with his estranged family relations, his fear probably involves a portion of shame.”

Another alien notion for her colleague. He moved as if he were to go to fetch wine glasses then seemed to change his mind.

“Shame,” he echoed, as if he was checking that his hearing was working correctly.

“Yes, shame,” she confirmed after a beat.

Hannibal tilted his head, seemingly rolling the word around in his mouth before he proceeded to fetch wine glasses from the far corner wall cabinet.

“What kind of shame?” He asked idly over his shoulder.

She took a deep breath and finally rested her writing hand upon the almost full page of notes, “It is common among those who spent their childhoods being told, usually covertly, that their existence is a complication, that his presence inconvenienced those around him.”

Hannibal brought the wine glasses to the desk and poured, his movements smooth and unaffected by their topic.

“Yes, he was turned away by his local middle school; the language used to justify the grounds of refusal were complete ableism.”

Bedelia Du Maurier felt a nudge of pity, that this was what beta-born omegas of the United States faced in the eighties and for a good part of the nineties, sometimes even now when accessing the state school system - treated as having deformity because of their unusual high perception and a hormonal cycle that would cause chaos after the fourteenth year.

She gave these ideas a moment to simmer, without an iota of doubt that Hannibal's steel-trap brain was in the process of collating every scrap of information he had ever read on childhood trauma centralised around shame or humiliation, general omega neuropsychology, statistical summaries of omega experiences in the United States public school system and anything else he felt applied. As a psychiatrist who entered the game late so to speak, Hannibal could impress even her and would come to a cognition of what she was saying, even if he had no personal reference after strangling his own sense of shame in the crib.

"I see what you mean," he delivered her drink, "But I'm not ashamed of anything."

No, who would have *ever guessed*.

She took the offered wine and tipped it in silent thanks, somehow managing to keep her voice moderately tart instead of corrosively acidic, "But he's not you."

Hannibal went back to her desk and picked up his glass by the base, choosing to lean on the desk edge as he lingered over the lip of the glass.

She eyed his use of her desk and resisted to urge to tell him to get his thigh away her table. At least he wasn't sitting on it, though that would probably be *rude*, and Lecter was all about manners.

"No, I suppose not…" breathed her colleague, studying his own amorphous reflection on the surface of the dark liquid before he tilted the glass and disrupted it, staring at the streaks, "He's completely different from me, different upbringing, different education… and yet he can understand me, assume my point of view, assume the views of those he hates and those he fears…"

It's beautiful, no one said, but the sentiment rested in the silence anyway.

Hannibal tipped his glass to take the first taste. She timed her sip to synchronize with his, a little trick to create connection. She had no idea if it would work on him, but it didn't hurt to try.

"Most people can handle the shame of not fitting in eventually," Hannibal mused, still tasting the wine on his lips.

"After being shown very little care at home, he was rejected by school, and then rejected again at his eventual middle school, a private paid school with a notable alpha and omega presence in the student body."

Think for a moment.

The man went back to his seat, frowning as he settled back into place.

"Are you proposing he experiences shame towards his impoverished origins?"

She shrugged. Without data, one could only make guesses. Lecter was on one hand extremely forward in sharing details about Will, but also seemed to omit information. It may be unwarranted but she hadn't travelled this far in her professional capacity as this alpha's

lighthouse without developing an even better bullshit detector than what was granted her at birth.

“The shame of poverty has been known to cast a long shadow.”

Especially in a highly material society, which they certainly lived in.

Hannibal shook his head, “If it were just being excluded for being poor, Will would simply shrug it off.”

Actually he secretly wished that Will was a little bit more materialistic, so that he might have another way to hold onto the omega. But honestly, he was attracted to this too, how Will didn’t see *things*, his senses more attuned to the ineffable and intangible.

“So what is it instead?”

This was a complicated question and she was prepared for the long ponderous silence that fell. She even enjoyed these moments, experiencing that strange sense of benevolence, of reassurance, that even Hannibal Lecter had a heart, even if it was dark and twisted.

“You told me that the betas and omegas were kind to him at school, that he had lunch companions and even won a science competition, and yet surrounded by people he was told were his own, he was still uncomfortable.”

It took him a moment but he raced right up to her in one furious long gallop and overtook her.

“The omegas at the school were welcoming and accepted him; but he couldn’t join them,” Hannibal breathed deeply, his gaze somewhere on the horizon, piercing the distance between her office and his house, where right now Will Graham was perched on an armchair and sinking his mind into fifth part of *À la Recherché du Temps Perdu,* an English translation edition from earlier last century that once belonged to Uncle Robertus.

“His father considered him using the resources granted to him upon birth to be unfair gains; acceptable for mandatory education, everyone needs to know their letters and numbers, it’s an intrinsic American right. But to use *aegis* beyond that…”

She watched her younger colleague for several long moments, sipping her wine and subtly flexing the fingers of her writing hand. There was something deeply satisfying about this moment.

The silence grew long enough for an entire circuit of her office, the precision machinery of Hannibal’s mind almost overheating as it spun.

Once more she felt benevolence towards the omega making all of this possible.

“He devalued him,” she finally threw out, choosing professionalism over her own desire to see Lecter’s brain spin a few more rounds.

The reset worked.

“An idea was planted,” breathed Hannibal, his gaze returning to the present, something rippling through that deep dark pool, “Will’s relationship with me being an exchange, sexual access in return for financial security and social mobility.”

The way that Hannibal said it so clinically, so mildly; like this wasn’t a very deep gushing wound on his omega’s psyche, made with constant friction over weeks, months and maybe even years, starting when he was probably too young to understand the unfairness of this judgment.

“Shame is a distortion,” she offered, her voice low and soothing, “While we can contort ourselves in all manners of ways… no one can hold the pose forever. Eventually we have to… untwist.”

Hannibal Lecter sighed, a great big sound of exhalation that surprised her with its texture, verging on the edge of *emotion,* “It’s a good thing that Will has come into my care.”

She frowned faintly; the omega wasn’t a patient, and yet with the *way* that Lecter just said that…

Her colleague checked his watch, “While we have another twenty-minutes, I shall have to end today early; I have a dinner reservation at *Isshouan*.”

With Will Graham no doubt.

The session would end even if she wanted to continue - no, she was more than happy to finish up early - because Lecter was unable to wait. He could manage the slavering beast only so much, one had to be reasonable.

”Of course, Hannibal. Enjoy your night.”

Standing to leave, her colleague returned his empty glass to her desk and departed with a short good evening.

He left her the wine. Nice to see some humanity in him finally, she chuckled under her breath - or maybe he was just in this much of a hurry.

Long live Will Graham, she thought with a small smile as she finished her wine and stood to get a refill, already intending to stay late to sort out some paperwork - may he never wake up from his sip of Hannibal’s poisoned chalice.

“I’m sorry.”

Will stared out the side window, not reacting at the sound of someone entering the room. His own voice startled him. It sounded normal, unremarkable, nothing at all like reality where the

person speaking just smashed an entire tea set like a tantruming four-year old.

Whatever had gripped him five minutes ago had left as quickly as it had come. His limbs felt a bit heavier but that's all. An awl was sticking out of his rib but that's not new, it had long merged with his flesh. These days he mostly forgot it, functional despite it, but now he was pinned in place, pinned by paralysis, just not the one he was expecting, dreading and anticipating.

There's a beat of quiet.

"I can't accept that apology. If I accepted it, then I would have to apologize as well - for agreeing with you."

Will gave a mirthless chuckle at the response, ran his fingers through his hair and along his hot scalp, almost wishing he could stick his digits inside, rearrange the neurons and cells to be more sensible, less volatile.

"Smashed your tea set. Seems worth an apology."

"With the extra space, I can finally buy that new set I've been undecided on."

Will chuckled again, a curl of dark amusement setting off a cascade of oppositional melancholy. He stayed where he was, hunched over his knees, hand gripping his nape hard enough to bruise.

"It wasn't expensive, was it?"

It had been a nice tea service, very white and crisp, fine crisscrosses wrapped around the body and cups. Not that he knew anything about porcelain or tea.

"Would you feel better or worse if it was?"

He didn't know; the rational leaned towards a negative and the other preferred a positive.

"It wasn't a Limoges."

Which meant nothing to him, but he understood anyway. Will felt relief underneath it all at the confirmation he didn't destroy some antique with only fifty sets left in the world or a priceless heirloom. But he's not surprised, because this was another thing they were alike on; stuff was disposable, to be used and retired once it was used up. Hannibal enjoyed his materialism but to imbue plates and cups with more significance than rationally deserved was either insanity or stupidity; this was the real world, full of moths and rust and thieves.

"Do you feel better?"

Will took a deep breath, tried to straighten up, crossed his arms over his front, somehow redirect the spillage of his inner sea.

"After or in general?"

“After, in general, all.”

“Some,” he admitted.

The immense jarring horror of all twelve pieces hitting the ground in a tidal wave of bone porcelain had been almost musical in its loudness and madness.

“Then it was worth it,” decreed Hannibal with his usual acumen.

Will sighed, a weight he didn’t know he was clinging to dissolving, draining away. He had gotten comfortable, living his days in this curated house with pre-planned meals, gotten comfortable with peeling whatever was handed over and taking instructions on how long or how short, playing kitchen assistant, playing verbal games, taking his medication. He had forgotten where he came from and why he was here. Then Hannibal requested that he make the call, organize flights and book the hotel so they could tick that off the insanely long list of things to do before D-Day.

“Everything makes me mad.”

It must have been obvious. The pettiness that had been slowly creeping over him, his mouth getting more jagged, provoking Hannibal with little backhand sleighs of words, daring the alpha to respond, to do *something*, give him an excuse.

“Modern life is madness,” the alpha mused, “Hardly surprising when a little rubs off on us.”

Such a slick gleaming tongue.

Hannibal sat next to him, strangely neutral in presence despite the span of his shoulders and stretch of his limbs. An Oxford in matte black turned and tapped the new plain Gibsons in dark navy, a little hello between shoes.

“Calm, the word comes from the Occitan word *Calma*. It’s a naval term, did you know that?”

“Calm seas.”

“Yes, the absence of wind. Or absence of employment, if you’re a sailor that is.”

Will chuckled despite himself.

“People get overly obsessed with being calm these days, my patients talk about it often, right before they talk about wisdom - it’s at this point that I try to convince them, calm and wisdom is not something you can learn from a self-help book or indeed from me.”

“Why not?” Will chuckled darkly, “Sprinkle calm like pepper and wisdom like salt on themselves daily, solve all their problems and cares.”

That made Hannibal laugh, yet somehow the sound wasn’t jarring or out of place against the emotional basin of muck Will found himself forced to hold.

“Yes they do try their best to season themselves, to zero effect, because to be calm is to be static, immobile, paralyzed.”

Another word that was rapidly heading towards the disown list.

“What word should we use then?”

Hannibal took a deep breath, thoughtful, “While I yearn for those moments when I am in harmony with the world and time seems to stand still, I also know that I will not get there by ‘calm’ - let’s be honest, Will, no one ever responds well to being told to ‘calm down’ when we are upset or angry.”

“No supper, straight to bed?”

The alpha tilted his head, indulgent, “I think an extra serving of dessert - what do you feel like?”

“Too much sugar isn’t good.”

He couldn’t care less but he had to be accountable now, didn’t he?

“If you’re worried about nutrition, I assure you, a cheat day won’t upset the balance of things.”

“Famine and war?”

“Tuberculosis and gangrene,” Hannibal agreed gravely with good-humor, and then leaned right in to breathe into the shell of his ear, “Plus I’m sure we can work it off.”

Will leaned away and leveled the alpha with a deadpan stare, because really? Now? The man stared back, unflappable, grounded, his smile blithe. This deviant, Will bit his lower lip, his mood reshaping under the introduction of new elements.

“Rather than pursue calm, I prefer to pursue ‘peace’ - derived from the Greek *pegnumi*, which means to repair, to adjust, to work as a crafter might work upon a piece of leather or a gem.”

“*Pax Romana*, verb *pango*.”

Hannibal beamed at him, almost coquettish as he leaned into Will’s side and wrapped an arm around the omega, “To repair, to adjust, to work - to be at peace implies an effort to bring things together as they should be. If you think about it, it’s diagonally opposite to the whole concept of calming down.”

“Not a *sleek* perfect ideal.”

“Yes,” the alpha leaned until his nose was pressed against the curve of Will’s shoulder, his eyes holding the younger man captive, “Such a restrictive, inherently false view of being well-adjusted.”

“I don’t know. It seems… unsafe.”

Anything was liable to capsize him right now. He couldn’t work with it when *it* was liable to froth and explode in a spray of salt and splinters at the first touch.

“Peace does not make false promises that you’ll be omitted from the whirlwinds of life, the storms and the waves but rather includes them.”

How?

Will exhaled and finally let himself lean back into the weight of the alpha, letting himself be hypnotized.

“I refuse to be annoyed by minor inconveniences - running out of eggs, a patient missing their appointment, getting sick at the wrong time.”

He had to snort at that. Hannibal, down with a *cold*? Heaven forbid, he would probably kill the man with his attempts at cooking within a day or somehow off him with a heart attack upon recovery by leaving the kitchen in devastation.

“I don’t know if I can *adult* right now.”

“I seem to remember some good advice that we should model ourselves after children.”

“Throw ourselves on the ground and cry at will?”

Or break an entire fine porcelain tea set in his case.

“What’s more lamentable than to feel like crying and not dare to?”

Will blinked and felt a tremor run through him. *Ugh*. Hannibal had a way with words. It was like some *evil genius* was standing behind the man holding a script, feeding him the lines.

“Some would call it being *neurotic*.”

It shouldn’t matter but he had heard that enough times to hate the word; it was right up there with ‘*sensitive*.’ People somehow always say ‘*sensitive*’ like it was a failing or a flaw and not like it was just another point on the spectrum of human personality traits.

Leaning in with far more deliberateness than the moment warranted, Hannibal kissed his neck, just under the ear, a warm, nuzzle of hot breath.

“All the great things humanity has… they came from the neurotic. Great works of art, hospitals, early computer algorithms. The neurotic creates or inspires literary and musical masterpieces. The neurotic sees what’s really there and tries to warn us. The world may never know what’s owed to the neurotic, or the person who kept the neurotic alive long enough to show their brilliance, or how much they both suffered in order to bestow such greatness upon humankind. But every time I enjoy fine music, beautiful art and poetry, all those exquisite things that make life bearable, I raise a glass to the neurotic - because they survived their insomnia, loneliness, sorrow and insanity to create all those wonderful things.”

Well, if that was a booty call, it was on a *whole* other level. Maybe what he was thinking made it onto his face as Hannibal's face certainly did an *interesting* little flip flop - disbelief that Will's mind actually went there when here he was, trying to philosophise the emotional turmoil out, swiftly followed a leer of delight, because his dastardly tendencies to turn anything into a chance for flirtation were finally paying dividends.

Will pursed his lips and ducked his head to the side, another drop sliding into the tiny pool in his ribs. Maybe it's just his imagination but the awl in his side shifted. The space around his ribs wasn't infinite, there would soon be a conflict of space.

"We're at a time in history when society would prefer for us to be cogs in a machine - untroubled, smiling, having no intrusive thoughts or emotions from morning to evening so we can attend to our duties - we need more than ever to be very clear that this calm is a lie, and buying into the lie by punishing ourselves for having unsightly emotions will just increase our torment."

If you don't fit inside the washing machine, just get out - before we throw you out.

"Well, you're always *nice* and serene."

That made Hannibal laugh.

"Well I'm not always, but thank you. I've long accepted that I won't always be *nice*, or serene, might even be disliked sometimes - and that's completely fine."

"Sure about that? Your *socially acceptable façade* sure looks solid."

The man smiled and leaned their foreheads together, "A suit of armour I made for myself, useful but that's all - I still need to get out of it for food and bathroom breaks."

The personal aegis of Hannibal Lecter.

Will studied the brown eyes barely two inches from his own; it's dangerous, a vortex that went all the way down, beyond the depths that his sights could scope, the only sign that it went deeper being the distant howl of gale winds that came from where there should be *nothing* … He blinked and broke their gaze, straightened, his mind and emotions reassembled.

"I'm sorry for breaking the tea set, I'm not sorry that I got angry."

"Apology accepted."

The alpha finally stood and offered a hand, lightly calloused from surgical work and kitchen prep, long tapered fingers nurtured from caresses upon harpsichord and piano keys. Despite the heaviness of his limbs, Will took it and let himself be led downstairs. He had left a huge mess in the kitchen. It was only right he actually helped clean it up.

He took the bucket he was handed and watched as Hannibal switched on all the spotlights then crouched to clear the shards. White broke up the neutral grey of the floor tiles, every

fragment warning them off with a sharp glint caressing their edges, clinking, chiming or hissing when they brush by them or accidentally stepped on them.

“Often this world is determined to force a belief that we only have two options when faced with our humanity; either bury our emotions or let them control us. Yet I would argue that being truly human means being neither.”

Will leaned down to catch the first bundle, wickedly-sharp fragments of what had previously been a truly very lovely tea set, “I could use a valve replacement.”

The alpha chuckled under his breath and continued to clean, the jangled clatter of the broken porcelain almost musical as they were swept up into a dustpan, “A little step back and some self-awareness is probably all you need.”

“Sure, easy enough,” Will sighed and leaned in again when the alpha lifted the full pan, “Tell me where you got yours and I’ll pick one up for myself.”

Hannibal’s chuckle was like a bass beat next to the clip clop of some bigger fragments being gingerly picked up and dropped directly into the bucket.

“Engaging with emotions, listening to them and recognising what they want to tell us is an important part of our development as functional adults.”

He huffed under his breath, recognising where they were, where Hannibal was trying to take him; “No light without shadow, no wholeness without imperfection.”

He didn’t mean the paraphrase to sound sarcastic but it came up that way anyway. It wasn’t like Hannibal would be ruffled; no, just as expected, the alpha gave him a pleased look and bent to continue restoring their ability to walk through the kitchen without being pierced in the soles, leaving a trail of bloody footprints.

“While I am hardly pious, I hold great respect for the God that my mother professed faith in: when he assumed human form, he was angry, he cried in grief, said no to intimidation and challenged the status quo.”

God in human form had been the heretic of his day.

“Incited crowds, overturned tables, told people get off their moral high horse, started a counterculture that dragged thousands of years of paganism from the right to the wrong.”

The alpha huffed, still so damn amused and his powers of hypnosis no more lessened by being on his knees, up to his elbows in broken cups and saucers, “To have accepted the status quo would have been nothing short of masochism.”

“Got him killed,” Will pointed out.

Finished with the pieces that could be swept up or collected by hand, Hannibal stood and stretched a little, before taking the bucket from Will for disposal. The broken porcelain was poured into the bin, jangling against one another as they landed.

“If what you do doesn’t get you slated for execution, one could hardly be counted as truly free.”

Ahh…okay. Will didn’t know how to take that. He supposed that from the alpha’s perspective, having spent his earliest formative years under a social system that decreed both his parents and their children as deviants, Hannibal would have some interesting things to say on the matter of breaking the status quo. But here in America, the *freedom* that got one slated for execution was usually a sea of corpses and a semi-automatic or stealing a life and ending it when this was the exclusive right allotted to God, fate and idiocy.

“Besides, he was wearing a Person Suit when his life was ended,” continued Hannibal, “He entered the fish bowl to be with his beloved fish. But lest we forget, he’s neither a Piscean nor an ewe. Humanity did ourselves a favour by making him take it off again.”

Miss Maria von Werstack, the sole nun in residence at the private Catholic high school that Will boarded at between fifteen to just shy of eighteen, has surely just suffered a massive heart attack if she were still alive, or turned over in her grave if she was already gone, called back by the fact that her old student was about marry a heretical psychiatrist with philosophical leanings and a silver tongue. Vaguely he wondered what his actually pious grandmama would say to this piece of sophistry that Hannibal just threw down like any idle Thursday.

Will went to the cupboard where the vacuum was kept and brought it over. The alpha took the device with a grateful smile and began to vacuum with the same brisk movements that came out when he was cooking. Efficiency of motion, or something.

Will backed away and even curled up in the new armchair in the corner, lifting his feet as instructed. He didn’t leave though he kind of wanted to, because the conversation was clearly not finished. Hannibal deserved being heard through to the end considering what he did to the man’s tea set.

“I believe in always harnessing my anger,” Hannibal continued without missing a beat as soon as the vacuum was off, and then holding Will’s gaze with an odd intensity, he said, “I don’t judge my anger.”

I don’t judge my anger.

The words soared through him and left a boiling steaming tear in the ocean, all drift patterns of swirls and eddies held in places for eons broken up to rock and seethe.

The alpha disappeared back into the laundry to empty the vacuum in the bin before he returned it to its rightful place in the corner closet where all the other cleaning supplies were kept, his movements purposeful, economical, practiced.

“No need for authorisation or commentary?”

No attempts at arbitration, no decrees of guilt, no offers of absolution, nothing but the present?

Hannibal washed his hands free of the slight stain of powdered bone and dried them, his smile blithe, “I’ll take my chances.”

Dignity in risk.

His mouth moved into a smile, and then out of it and then back, uncertain what expression he should make here. Finally he settled for no expression at all.

“And if it hurts?”

Hannibal seemed entertained by the question, but his gaze was soft and tender as he began to approach, finally stopping directly before Will and leaning down into a crouch to tug at the omega’s limp hands, “A momentary ache, something you will no doubt be more than capable of handling - and what often follows is sweet relief. Not the artificial calm that the world tells us to aim for.”

Will allowed his hands to be flipped around; he realised belatedly that the alpha was checking for any accidental nicks.

“And if I get the not-often end of the stick?”

Hannibal let go, satisfied that there was indeed not a single wound, not even a paper cut, an edge of mischief to his affection; “I will be there with a replaceable tea set of reasonable value for your convenience.”

Will didn’t know why he expected something else. The tiny pool in his rib cage was not so tiny anymore, it had a certain measurable mass to it now - enough to finally start to spin.

Hannibal stood with an audible crack of a knee, and moved to settle behind the central island counter, the master of this domain. “This life tortures us enough, why add to our burdens?”

Cos they were all a bunch of masochists, of course. Except for Hannibal, who seemed to be determined to be defiant to the end.

His mouth twitched without his permission, “Add another tea set to the cart?”

“As many as we both need,” Hannibal agreed, then moved towards the pantry, “I know it’s a bit earlier than normal, but I feel like the madness is coming on - what do you think? Should we medicate earlier today?”

The antidote for madness today was a very red refrigerated Chambourcin Brut Rosé with a handwritten label in blocky caps.

“A hybrid of French and American grape variants,” Hannibal introduced as he poured the lightly whispering wine, “A *teinturier* grape, both dry and sweet, red skin with red flesh, a grape with nothing to hide.”

The first sip lapped over his tongue. It’s low in bubbles compared to champagne but it still popped in his mouth, raspberries and cream, violets and sunshine. It’s made by an

acquaintance, a retired winemaker, and barely past 7 ABV - so Will was allowed to medicate with ten ounces today.

“I dislike the current thinking that asks us to tuck our anger away,” Hannibal said when they were seated in the dining room, a charcuterie spread before them and red staining their teeth. “Anger gives us strength to act, Gandhi called it a profound energy that helps us transcend ourselves.”

Will drank another sip, a mere taste, pacing himself, secretly scared that someone would find out that he’s drinking in his state. He hadn’t been able to quite shake off the unease that maybe Hannibal was wrong despite having fact-checked this on his own. His body was a custom-made incubator of the highest order, a biological habitat demonstration unit. A glass of wine was nothing.

“I don’t think he meant smashing up tea sets.”

“That’s because your anger doesn’t have direction,” the alpha smiled, taking another sip that stains. “Some forms of anger are *just*, purposeful. We just need to find you the right direction.”

“You mean the *other* direction.”

“Your own direction,” Hannibal agreed with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for welcoming me back
To be honest I live mostly in bed now (best thing ever - we could all use some bed lounging) and write entirely on a phone (can’t have a desk, medical equipment priority) but I am in great mental form :) so much fun writing this
I’d forgotten the fun due to all the medical torture

I didn’t want to take up space here so I posted a comment that you can read if you care to, but if you don’t it, doesn’t matter :)
Thank you for reading
If anyone reads a line and goes - huh seems familiar, it’s probably because you might have read the same non fiction books, I based a lot of stuff on philosophy and neuroscience stuff I’ve read before
And the murder doll houses are real

Amarone + Sancerre

Chapter Summary

If only Will knew how to feel
Bedelia is trying to be a good psychiatrist
A phalanx of two, soon to be three (new scene added 28 Sept)

Chapter Notes

PLEASE IMAGINE WILL'S POV AS ENDLESS SARCASM
Except for sometimes, I always hear Will in my head as being constantly sarcastic about literally everything
So the RTD version of young Will is just constant ????! at everything related to Hannibal — because he is awkward about emotions
(Am I the only one who suspected Will in the show had alexithymia??)

I sometimes suspect my writing can get boring because it can go for so long
THIS CHAPTER IS STILL MISSING A SCENE OR TWO
I write on a phone - it's often awkward
I am posting so I don't accidentally lose entire parts cos of butter fingers
I do write in Google docs to prevent such things but I edit directly on ao3 and have indeed gone into panics over lost scenes
This chapter is focused on emotions and mental states

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you believe in free will?"

The question came leftfield, as it always did in Hannibal's presence - this was Hannibal's pattern, he was starting to realize.

Will paused mid-sip of his whiskey, fingers still aching and shaky with cold from his contact with Baltimore City's idea of winter evenings. This windy chill would take some getting used to, if he wanted this relationship to reach the desired conclusion. The roaring fireplace helped.

"It's a requirement of the job."

Hannibal relaxed back in his chair, warm enough to no longer need the heat of the hearth.

“I suppose it would be hard to assign responsibility for one’s actions, if you are only acting out what nature and nurture made of you.”

“Do *you* believe in free will?”

Tilting his head to look at him, the psychiatrist smiled, charmed by the question being turned back upon him. Once again, part of Will took a step back, startled by the alpha’s reaction; it’s not that it’s the wrong reaction, it’s just never the expected reaction.

“I believe in having agency; like you, it's a requirement of my profession.”

Right. *Dumb question*.

Officer Graham, arbitrator of homicides and murderers, meet the alpha courting you, Doctor Lecter, arbitrator of personality disorders and the mentally-ill.

“Can’t *unscrew* yourself or ever change, if we’re all only acting out what nature and nurture made of us.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitched as he raised his wine glass for a sip, “Yes.”

No free will meant that one’s life would always be a narrow one-way lane without any U-turns or branches.

What about under? Let’s find the drains.

“However as my more endeavouring colleagues explore the neurological, sociological and psychological mechanisms of intent, I am often forced to reassess my stance.”

“Entertaining alternatives isn’t an option for me, sentencing hinges upon being in control of one’s actions.”

Face half-shadowed by the glow of the fireplace, Hannibal Lecter leaned towards him until all he’d have to do was turn to breath on each other, a wicked hint to the curve of his mouth as he murmured into the whorls of an ear pink from cold winter winds and unprotected; “You can entertain alternatives now, Will.”

(With me)

Entertain the alternatives, Will.

As though this was the signal he’d been waiting for, the bare living room warped as furniture and art flowed in to populate the corners and cornices, the hush of evening melting away and fire snuffed out of existence as he regathered in the lounge room, perched on the tuxedo sofa with heavy jacquard, Švarnas Lecter’s placid visage peering down at him.

Crouched next to him, hands over his with long fingers threaded through his own, his ‘entertainment of the alternatives’ tilted his head, gaze inscrutable.

“Where were you, Will?”

Startled, he snatched his hands back and scrambled to his feet, rounding the sofa to put it between him and Hannibal, the pulse at his throat throbbing as his mind struggled to put the memory and a dozen others back into their pigeonholes.

“Sorry, I was— I wasn’t—” He stammered, unsettled to be caught in one of his immersions; it’s not that he hasn’t woken the man due to a nightmare now they share a bed, but this was something he kept to himself.

“What did you say?” He finally managed, forcibly pushing the words out.

“Where did you go?” Hannibal asked, curiosity darkening his eyes, “You replied to my queries but you were absent.”

Nowhere. *Here* . Only *not* here but here in December, the fourth night. And many other nights, clicking and clacking across the planes of his mind now that he was thinking clearer, out of the tunnel.

“Nothing, just, thinking— thinking about stuff I gotta do.”

Will sidestepped the hand held out to him and bent to scoop up the book lying face down on the sofa.

“Anything I can help with?”

He hesitated before decisively dog-earing the page.

Will Graham arrived in Baltimore MD five days ago, or six depending on how one counted, excused from doing anything in the first week but ***rest***... Like a lump of dough rising to be ready for the fire.

The weekend had been fine, Hannibal’s presence keeping him distracted, falling back into the pattern they’d begun when he first entertained the notion of a child, of a life here reading by a fire in the evenings and talking contemporary Buddhist philosophy, mass delusion, interesting parts of Herodotus’ ‘*The Histories*.’

But a strange disconnect began the moment he woke up as a resident and not a guest, like he was both himself and not-himself at the dining table, cautiously pausing when Hannibal mentioned they needed to see a lawyer about the *confarreatio* contract awhile other-him just smiled along when the alpha playfully told him to ignore everything *ever* depicted by Hollywood on the subject — there was nothing weird in these contracts, like how many children were required of Will, the one idea that always gets the modern beta imagination rolling. He huff sardonically at the insult of *him* believing anything of something labeled as ‘mass entertainment’ while other-him wilted, appetite gone. He went to change when Hannibal suggested a walk, only to freeze for a whole minute in the bedroom when he took off his new house robe because other-him was stunned to realise what he thought was a brand name logo was actually WGL superimposed on each other in Gothic font.

Will hung up the robe and got dressed, tried to ignore the fact that the same logo was on the little tab sticking out from the bottom hem of his sweater, that it had been scorched onto the leather insoles of the plain toe chukkas and navy gibsons delivered last minute to Hannibal's suite in New Orleans, both thrown into the suitcase without thought because the plain oxfords were perfectly comfortable for the plane ride. He pulled on his coat and found it again, embroidered in raspberry ombre over the inner breast pocket, stark against the blue lining.

Not really sure what to feel about getting his own monogram, ornately sharp L stabbing through the W and G— and in a different frame of mind, he might even laugh at the visual pun— Will Graham went downstairs and took over the tidying up so Hannibal could changed for their walk.

Out the front, he stared at his new home wreathed in spring foliage and listened to Hannibal's plans for further renovations, trying to imprint the image into his slippery memory banks, hoping it'll sink down and take root, or be crushed and scattered to become part of the foundations; become home and refuge. Then he let the hand on his back guide him down the street, feeling his heavy limbs slow him down, fatigued because one didn't just recover from months of insomnia and stress overnight, only to become aware of his thoughts swerving off course to crash into the waves and drop straight down.

A furrow creased his brow every time he turned away from the alpha, troubled by how he would get from the bedroom to the kitchen or bathroom when eventually he would be laid out like a beached whale and a hundred other unformed fears, morphing into thorns and then grotesque shapes the longer he tried and failed to deny them attention. He barricaded them with compiled lists of rationalisations and salted them with sardonic reminders that began with 'You always wanted children' 'Yeah, try to remember that Hannibal is a real person, with actual feelings, and not just your *really good alibi'* 'Don't ruin this, you actually like this one, and by some miracle, he thinks he's in love with this neurotic mess' and 'Mated omega, (n) children, *interviewed really well* professionally.'

And since his thoughts were drowning, it quickly descended into 'So you're marrying into money, well, cry me a fucking river over your insecurities while your alpha asks if you would like a Land Rover or a Mercedes and adds you to his fancy health insurance' 'Oh yes, you sure traded the witch for the devil, living in a huge townhouse, an alpha who cooks all your meals, reads in six languages and *lights up* when you discuss dermestid beetle colonies and how you'd change the decomposition guidelines cos national forensic guides don't do justice to the outrageous level of insect activity in the steamy South' then exploded into 'Sexual monogamy is awful, *oh yes* it's *terrible* to trust the alpha you're getting naked with and not being objectified as a safe and legal human-shaped heroin high' 'Your only relationships till now were either non-dates with alphas who treated you like a magic lamp or beta females who treated you like a training level, and your sexual experiences were serial one-night stands sometimes turning into days-long benders during your yearly Chernobyl meltdown, with beta males who often get confused when you get naked because sexual education is such crap in this country— SO you're hardly an authority on decades-long conjugality, *ergo,* shut up and stop making mountains out of molehills' which became a mocking 'You don't have a right to Buyer's Remorse, you're committed— *eighteen years* going-on-life committed' 'You will not be the asshole who ran away like a statistic anomaly' 'They'll pull you apart for this

too—you'll be known as the omega with *no* nurturing instincts' before finishing off with a tired 'At least give the kid *one* stable parental figure in their life.'

Unsure if he's being normal-mean or about to descend into breathless panic, because he was still holding his breath for that surge of electrifying devotion to hit, for his full switchover to omega parental mode to free himself from all cares related to himself— his feelings about Hannibal's feelings, horror at the whole process of omega pubis symphysis diastasis when he should be focusing on the notion of a warm squished thing the size of a butternut, smelling of clear pure tones, milky sweet and unstained…

Will Graham kept his mouth shut so he could be mean only to himself, took Hannibal's offered arm then stubbornly focused on the scenery and hoped the alpha didn't notice how Will hadn't dropped a single sarcastic comment all morning. It won't last, but he'll keep it up for today.

The alpha chose the townhouse as much for proximity to Johns Hopkins as its architecture, therefore it was circumspect about its extravagance because even a century ago money could only get so much square footage when one was a throw away from the university. It's likely the house once had a trailing cloak of greenery but now it was boxed in by Federals and Annes. It stood alone in its premium Edwardian elegance with Chateauesque flourishes, all zipped neatly into the brick stitching of an early 20th century American townhouse.

No space restrictions had been imposed upon residences further away from the orbit of the university; all unmistakably *manors* with festooned rolling gardens, *natural* in that way only meticulous cultivation could realise, any garages invisible among the greenery because they're built decades or even a century after the fact.

If Will Graham squinted, he could almost believe he'd traveled back in time.

"The Sylvester-Chaflens," Hannibal gestured at one particularly lavish manse with wings, a dome and a *spire— a legit damn spire like a unicorn.*

"Several generations were once in the upper management of the early Baltimore Ohio Railway."

A reference he recognised easily, more incredibly, one he'd seen in an elementary textbook.

"Doesn't exist anymore."

Hannibal smiled in response, a weird little smile he got whenever their conversations touched on the temporality of this world, "Yes."

In the back of his mind, a voice that might have been Hannibal's began to murmur — *Thanatos and Eros, death and life through the lense of Freud and the ancient Greeks… Zen master Dōgen once wrote that 'In death there is nothing but death'… What a mysterious phrase, I thought, but after pondering upon his words, I arrived at an understanding of its meaning; when we devote ourselves to anything, everything else disappears* — while another whisper urged him to find out if anyone had died in these houses, because odds were someone had died, and not from old age.

Will ignored them like usual. There were always so many of these little whispers on the rare occasion when the soil of his mind wasn't drained, cropping up like wild mushrooms after rainfall… It was even noisier now that he also had a tempest to keep a lid on.

The winding stairs in the house came to his mind's eye, the same winding staircases in all these manors, an ever-present threat for every impatient stomp, every missed step— A sharp flash of alarm passed through him as he imagined it, *falling* and *splattering red* everywhere like an overripe melon.

"…Must ask you to stop thinking so loudly."

Will let go of a breath he wasn't aware of holding in a loud gasp, "Sorry, what?"

Hannibal gave him a wry look, before looking away to an early-flowering spread of coral azaleas, reaching out to caress one with his index finger, tip to petal, "It's an adjustment for me too, but I imagine it's a bigger change for you."

Mouth-dry and his pulse still fluttering, Will wondered when he became so transparent or if this was the fabled connection between a well-matched alpha-omega pair, if they could be considered a match…

"Psychiatrist to psychic, wonder how the license transfer would go."

A corner of the alpha's mouth tugged up.

"Like you, I've been doing some accounting in my life."

He made a sound that might have been a tiny laugh if one pretended, "How's that going for you?"

"I'd like to think it's going well, though at some point I'll need a second opinion. However, my history in emergency medicine allows me to be intimately acquainted with the sword that dangles above all of us."

Will exhaled, ears ringing from the sucker punch that came from nowhere; the alpha was incredibly good at those, being a *psychiatrist*.

Neither he nor Hannibal could surrender now if mortality came for them. They *had to live on*, nurture the bud growing in the dark until it became a bulb, feed it, keep it warm, until it could be planted *firmly* to survive on its own, rhizome to blossom.

His mind went to humid summers, fishing for the first time with Dave under the watchful eyes of grandmama and her neighbor friends all slumped on folding chairs, slurping iced tea in the shade of trees; eating his catch whole, head to tail, it's death and his life; the little dead animals here and there as he walked carefully over the uneven banks, his fascination drawn to these bodies of predation and decay among the bristling burst of life in every bush, under every rock.

"Mortality confronts us in the dark damp of Aristotlelian sweat," he mumbled under his breath, not really something to be heard but Hannibal heard it anyway, with his bat ears, and

regarded him with that luminous smile, the one that always made the omega's neck turn a little red.

Will turned away, "Any professional advice for this future corpse?"

The alpha chuckled under his breath, "Since I've never died, any advice would be a Fool's advice."

Well, at least he was marrying someone self-aware.

"Only ever experienced, no blooper reels or reruns."

Hannibal regarded him fondly, *more fondly,* "Besides birth, death is the only other human act we cannot practice for."

Intimate relationships and parenthood though, those were human experiences one could study in great detail, break into segments, practice and train for, become good at. The thought made the tempest in his head ease a little.

But only a little.

"Murder mysteries and violent video games aside, most of my patients have never been in contact with a dead body."

He met Hannibal's wry gaze, because they had already read the opening of each other's books. His/your grandmother, laid out on her back already a plank board ready for removal. Your/his father, limbs akimbo on the stairs where he fell, the gunshot wounds small but fatal.

(Decay began four minutes after death, the words for 'four' and 'death' in Chinese were homonyms…)

There had been no closure for either of them. Will had been dragged off with a school bag bursting at the seams with clothes that made the social worker tut and his short-stay foster family cluck when he refused their nicer offerings, never to see grandmama's peacefully sleeping corpse again, his fist sweaty around his Mondragón bullet. And Hannibal never saw either of his parents except as old dried blood stains after being handed his sister and stuffed hurriedly into the attic, and she would also soon vanish.

Perhaps the long-echoing mysteries of these disappearances had nudged them towards the paths they each took, working in their unconscious to braid something out of those loose threads blowing about in disconnection. Studying the fray of the thread, those last moments before the thread was cut so abruptly, closure for corpses and those who love them; picking at the knots to loosen the tightening bondage of mortality; teasing out the knots of why some wished to tie themselves up while other strained against the threads of fate, all those moves of submission and resistance once the death knell actually struck and they found the noose already tied.

"In the past, children were kept away from birth and sex, but encountered death from a very early age starting with deathbed vigils and prayers for the recently departed."

“Name a kid after me when you guys get married.”

Cold crept across Will’s limbs and he shivered, a cold that had always been there but he’d just been too numb to feel it.

“Start them young so they learn tolerance for ambiguity, the discomforts and… intimacy of death.”

Hannibal smiled and switched to talking about the houses again, the gears of his mind as slick as his tongue — the Italianate mansion on the next corner, the Neo-classical on the corner after, manor after manor, in the precarious beauty of spring — all while pausing now and then to turn this way and that way, focusing on this flowering tree or that budding bushel, savouring what he called essence of *Primavera*.

Will took a deep shivery breath and found he could smell it, this *Primavera;* a honey sweetness, an undefined floral freshness, evanescence, fragility.

For all that it was a place of ghosts, the alpha’s corner of Baltimore City was a beautiful displaced hamlet; very quiet, little to no traffic, almost unnaturally serene like it was caught inside a bell jar. There were quaint corner stores in walking distance, a coffee shop, a large park with majestic trees and a children’s playground hidden just beyond the towering forms which pulled at his longing, something inside him drawn by little yells and happy cries, the chorus of joyous barking, normal life. It almost didn’t feel like he was in a city at all, much less the most populous city in Maryland; an entire neighborhood slightly out of step, just like Hannibal’s house with its antique furnishings, exotic horns and paintings mixed in with the fancy Miele dishwasher and commercial meat bandsaw for cutting through an entire haunch, bones and all.

The only thing missing were church bells toiling in the distance and a cemetery. In Europe, it wasn’t weird to picnic in a cemetery as they were literally everywhere outside the big cities, in every town, village and hamlet — and the most beautiful churches in the world were full of the interned dead, silent participants at every worship service, stony witnesses to every snap-happy tourist or laughing bridal party, celebrating at every funeral even if the church didn’t have room for another roommate. Italy was lovely in springtime, how about it? Did Will want to go?

(To picnic in cemeteries?)

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re obsessed?”

The alpha’s brows furrowed as he smiled curiously, “What am I obsessed with?”

Are you referring to yourself, Hannibal’s hand whispered as they slid over the small of his back.

“With death.”

Even as the words left his mouth he knew that it was a ridiculous thing to say considering his profession.

The alpha smirked (*pot, meet kettle*) and rebutted in a smug purr, his diction rhythmic, *"Nullum contemptu mortis telum ad vincendum homini ab dis immortalibis acrius datum est."*

It took a moment but his brain managed to cast a line into the swells of his memory ocean, fish out the Latin phrase's translation and dissect it for the who and what of the words…

Will Graham had tried to force it down, the grin that wanted to burst right out of him, not wanting to give the alpha the satisfaction.

"The prospect of death drives us to greatness?" He drawled, sardonic laughter bubbling away below his sternum, storm clouds lifted for the moment.

And you couldn't just say that like a normal person, he cocked a supercilious eyebrow.

Hannibal smirked, because *what would be the fun in that?*

It's these seminal moments, strung together like a well-lit landing pad, beckoning in the tempest, a hope for the weeks ahead, for the months and *years* implied.

Hannibal leaned in until he could smell all of him — morning coffee, the charred sweetness of tomatoes and peppers, the nutty sweetness of eggs and Gruyère, a woodsy pine charged with spice and smouldering cedar. With their breaths intermingling as their noses touched, it was easy to gravitate forward and kiss the man.

Only to break away a few seconds in and hide against the alpha's neck to muffle his helpless sniggering, because Hannibal *Lecter* just quoted Hannibal *Barca*.

The immortals have given man no sharper spur to victory than contempt for death.

It was a *good* answer — fit the context perfectly. *Yes, a perfect self-reference.* And so high brow, it came off as ridiculously cheesy.

Hannibal didn't allow him to pull away but cupped his face that way he did, forceful but gentle, one hand trailing down his cheek and along his jaw, curling over the back of his neck, deliberate, wanting and asking. Anyone could be watching them from the second-floor windows even if the hedges hid everything except the tops of their heads; he let himself be pulled into another kiss, open-mouthed and sharp with sweet promise.

They returned to the house hand-in-hand, comfortable like there had never been a break where Will had returned to New Orleans without a promise to return, scared off by the reality of what it would mean if he accepted the offer even though he's the one who invited Hannibal to make said offer, teasing the possibility when he took that shiny yellow diamond ring, the bait he didn't swallow at first pass for the likelihood he'll bite on the second.

Eyes met and kept meeting, again and once more, volley and return, chameleon blues coyly greeting covetous browns, communicating through glances and smiles as they unlocked the door, took off their coats, ate smoked chicken terrine on slices of sourdough to get them through to dinner then spent the rest of daylight in bed.

Then still breathless and shaky because Hannibal had a *truly* talented tongue, Will was contemplating how much energy was involved in shimmying down for round two while petting Hannibal's head on his ribs because he could feel the alpha's renewed erection hot against him, when the alpha slid a hand along his inner thigh to tease his ass only to crook his finger up *there*. The omega flew up like a scalded cat and almost flung himself right off the bed, because outside of heat, that sensation was an led-in to jagged burning discomfort.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hannibal asked later over dinner.

No.

(Hell no)

"Is it painful?"

No.

(Yes, but like you'd know)

There were several other guesses; pelvic cramp, stomach cramp, issue with hip flexors or abductor muscles…

"Bedroom accidents are surprisingly common," was the next attempt, spoken in a hushed tone bright with humour, an invitation to share the risqué, the impolite, the humiliating.

Nope.

Hannibal took a bemused sip of his wine, running his tongue over his lower lip as he contemplated his next move, "I can continue to guess."

"Have fun with that."

Will focused on eating his dinner — halibut *en papillote* with salsa verde, root vegetables and a garnish of lemon sorrel.

Hannibal's eyes focused on the omega's mouth, opening and closing, the brief little flutter of eyelashes as the taste registered to Will's senses, pleased to see someone enjoying the meal, every flavor a new discovery. He looked down at his own plate and resumed eating, movements elegant and sharp like he's being scored by an etiquette coach.

"Pelvic girdle pain is very rare in omegas, it usually afflicts alpha females and betas."

Will stabbed a baby carrot.

Hannibal followed the carrot as it was dragged to its demise, before smirking and spearing his own baby carrot, delivering it to his own mouth and chewing precisely.

"Are you worried about sex?"

The younger man reached for his water and drank neatly, resumed eating, painfully aware that his every movement was being tracked right now.

“We won’t have to restrict ourselves until September.”

Hannibal paused to study the omega before averting his gaze to his own plate, knife and fork quietly moving to cut and stab, “It is possible to have penetration outside of heats. It’s often more pleasurable because all parties will be lucid.”

And people wonder why he *fucking hated psychiatrists.*

He put down his cutlery and exhaled loudly, “Can we go back to thought experiments about killing someone?”

That bad, I see, said the expression on Hannibal’s face, followed by a clinical vacancy as the alpha grew contemplative, not even trying to mask the fact he was thinking about *how to fix him.*

Will finished dinner with his shoulders slightly hunched, ready for a verbal barrage then glanced over cautiously when no pointed questions came catapulting across the table. He let go of a breath he wasn’t aware of holding when Hannibal gave him a soft smile, the psychiatrist tucked back out of sight.

Picking up the partial skeleton of halibut that came with his portion of fish but carefully prised out from the omega’s serving, Hannibal regarded it with mild curiosity, “When I took ‘Anatomy and Physiology’ for pre-med, the class began with five cadavers pre-dissected by senior students.”

Doctor Moreau, tall, bald and stern with a frighteningly detailed memory and zero tolerance for jokes. Quiet industrious hours, a teenaged Hannibal, young among his classmates because he’s always been an overachiever, taking his worksheets from one table to another, tracing lines, reading tags, flipping textbooks for context, examining the exquisite textures, the beautiful macabre complications of bodies, the faces of the dead respectfully shrouded — supposedly for the dignity of departed souls but really to save tender minds from the terror of premonition.

“I grew even more fascinated the human form, now that the wonder of anatomy had been revealed to me in the flesh and not merely on paper and ink.”

Every body the same, each body somehow different.

Detailed maps could be made to find the tiniest organ, bone or tendon, blueprints applicable to every beta, alpha, omega — yet each individual so unique in their own way.

Then there were the variables, the one in two hundred/twelve thousand/million who had no ovaries/testes or both, the liver being on the left not the right, or more than two kidneys. Unfortunately no one would let students dissect such rare cadavers; these specimens were left for the real experts, those researching physiological variations.

Hannibal has an old classmate who ended up in this area of medical research— Max was never boring company at a dinner party.

“My imagination was thoroughly overtaken by how all this complex machinery worked. Or had worked, when there was a pulse,” the alpha dabbed at his mouth while pointedly smiling at Will, until his dining companion got the message and wiped his own mouth quickly, flustered.

“I took to visiting the lab at every opportunity. I also annoyed Doctor Moreau with endless questions until he made me an assistant to shut me up with work—which suited me fine since that’s what I was aiming for,” Hannibal merely smiled but Will thought he saw a sly wink, “By second term, when I began to do my own dissections, having the keys meant being able to visit the lab outside of classes.”

Will saw the locked cadaver laboratory, always kept slightly cool and moderately dry, Hannibal turning the key and stepping through the door—into silence, formaldehyde and the faint leathery smell of bodies. Lower windows pasted in discarded gift wrap to keep out prying eyes… The dissipated golden glow of late afternoon sunshine… Maybe a small furtive peek behind the shroud?

“One day, Doctor Moreau assigned me to a new body, I was to expose the tendons and ligaments of the hands.”

Afternoon after afternoon, Hannibal sat alone with his tools, carefully opening up the hand, faithfully following diagrams he had sketched in great detail, copied from thick textbooks. Day after day, his understanding of the hand grew, soon to spread to other parts of the body as he dissected or witnessed others dissecting.

“As I was tidying up before a long weekend, I found myself going back to the corpse I began with. I found that if I pulled or pressed at certain angles on the exposed tendons, the fingers moved, one after another. Out of whimsy, I made the hands play *Moonlight Sonata*,” the alpha glanced over, a huff of humour at his young self being *young*, “I had never been uneasy around the dead, but that day I looked at that body, naked, face masked by cloth, and I was covered in goosebumps. Despite its dead state, this was a hand just like mine, capable of creation and destruction just like mine.”

This cadaver was like me, and I would be like this corpse. I saw the future…and the past.

The terror of premonition… Will broke out in goosebumps as if he were there himself, his hands ghosting over Hannibal’s gloved fingers pinching one tendon and another, playing an echoing melody only they could hear.

“Dissection usually becomes a psychological experience even if it begins as an intellectual one.”

Hannibal thoughtfully hummed as he stood to clear their plates for the final course, “I found it both.”

Will ate dessert because he helped with this and wanted a taste, his earlier discomfort and vague humiliation pacified by the conversational tangent— don't think he didn't realize what Hannibal was doing, distracting him with this trip down memory lane. Probably said something about him that he was calmed by talk of corpses but not sex. The carrot pineapple cake was a little spicy between the allspice and sugared ginger, but the cream cheese frosting with vanilla essence and grape and pineapple purée was as ridiculously delicious as he imagined when he followed Hannibal's instructions to throw it all into the fancy blender.

"The most dangerous room in the house is the bedroom," Hannibal reported mildly, like he was discussing weather, "Almost half of all registered ER injuries sustained in the home occur there."

Well, what a predictable return to form.

"Not the kitchen?"

"Apparently we're more likely to let down our guard in the bedroom."

Will looked at the alpha, then the remains of his cake smeared and scattered across his plate, and then looked back across the table again, uncertain if Hannibal would try again as soon as they went to bed.

There's no 'attempt' because they're watching Will's stress-levels. They'll ease into sex as a *mated pair* — what an alpha craved from an omega and what he, omega, was supposed to invite from his alpha — but impatience always ruined a good thing, Hannibal's measured caresses convey when they went to sleep on fresh sheets, there was time to ease into it, weeks and months and *years*.

Will was on the hook and not going anywhere.

"I feel lucky to have had such early encounters with the dead," Hannibal murmured from his sprawl over Will's ribs like an invasive feline, encouraging the omega to gingerly run his fingers through his hair with his nuzzling and scenting, "A few years after my time in the cadaver labs, bodies at rest became live bodies when I started my internship."

"Less quiet, more chaos. Sounds like *fun*."

The alpha's sleepy chuckle was a soft peaceful vibration against Will's sternum, "I began my rounds in palliative care."

To numb a future surgeon's sensitivity to suffering and cauterize the mysterious horror of mortality. Slumped softened bodies made of sagging skin and grizzled chins, jittery pains and agonies of those marked for the Ferryman, the pale veiny skin of those who won't get a chance to outgrow Minnie Mouse t-shirts and Pokémon stickers. Completely different from youthful, strong and healthy Hannibal, just hitting his twenties when he arrived for his internship because the alpha remained an overachiever.

"I spent most of my time trailing after the nurses than shadowing the doctors; they were wonderful, the nurses, they generously taught me their culture, the precariousness of dignity,

its value to those who have lost their bid for life and hopes for autonomy," Hannibal rolled back and took to his own pillow, a little apologetic as he rubbed Will's chest for bearing the weight of his head, before switching off the bedside lamp and unapologetically curling a hand around the omega's neck to pull him closer and gentle him to sleep, "The right way to make a bed around a person who cannot move, bathe them, how to move a person in and out of a wheelchair."

The particular skills of caring for the fragile, to care for you, when your time comes.

(At least your paralysis was only temporary, and *fruitful,* not a sign of termination — so hush)

Hannibal smiled with the haziness of approaching sleep, half-lidded eyes fixed on his soon-to-be husband's relaxed yet solemn face, voice barely above a whisper now.

"I watched patients die, and while it wasn't part of my duties, I helped prepare the bodies and was taught the right way to do it."

Will drifted off to the sound of the alpha murmuring about his next rotation— *obstetrics* of all departments. He might have huffed sleepily— hah, going from death as cure to death as injustice, the admin coordinating Hannibal's internship were clearly philosophers moonlighting with ulterior motives.

Hannibal Lecter was in love with him but realistic, impermanence the key to both his pains and his joys. He would live everyday with Will, without regret. When one understood that endings came for all people, all animals, all plants, the earth under their feet and the sun shining from above and even the cosmos swirling trillions of miles apart from the specs they were, death ceased to be a problem; an event inevitable for all things was no longer something unnatural, a divergence from the orthodox.

Material death is orthodoxy.

"But if the while I think on thee, all losses are restored and all sorrows end…" Will thought he heard as a soft breathy murmur as he dropped off into unawareness.

Then the weekend was over and Hannibal disappeared with a short morning goodbye against his cheek, off to dissect childhood trauma, suture up alienation and bandage over wounded psyches with benzodiazepines.

Will Graham got up an hour later and sat there for several long minutes, at a loss — before his stomach gave him a sharp noisy jolt, angry at being made to go without, and he grabbed his (monogrammed) house robe and stumbled into his house slippers to refuel this biological habitat demonstration unit.

Only to kick the slippers off and check if they had also been branded.

(On the inside, on the back of a tiny cotton tab with the pictogram wash instructions)

Will pulled on a pair of thick socks and went downstairs to eat his mandated breakfast. Oatmeal with flakes of coconut, chopped dates and shaved almonds, dried peaches, apricots and pineapples, then an oversized baked frittata with chopped sausage, onions and peppers that filled him right up and exactly one cup of coffee made using a French press because he didn't dare touch the Syphon coffee maker or La Marzocco.

At a loss regarding what form 'rest' took on if there's no cold case files, no whiskey or line casting and a stream involved, not even a porch chair, Will went after available distractions to push back the tempest eating away the calming blanket wrapped around him from last night's gentling. As with any rush of endorphin, it wore off; he's just trying to drag entropy out until the next recharge.

Something like claustrophobia choked up his throat and Will threw on a coat, intending to rush out with the keys in hand and phone in one pocket. Only to scramble back inside when the front door across the street opened and a family of four spilled out a second after him, the beta mother with a damp bath towel slung over her shoulder while she gently but swiftly grabbed handfuls of the little girl's hair, hair ties clamped between her lips. The pre-teen son watched exasperatedly with thumbs looped into his school bag straps while the father in a suit that screamed *corporate* went to start the car.

"Notification of impending parenthood is often discussed as a kind of border between life stages, much like an announcement of terminal illness."

A joke, just a joke, a poor one, *Hannibal had smiled, apologetic and unrepentant all in one expression when Will glared at him from across the business-class aisle, the plane speakers crackling their imminent arrival at the Reagan Washington, thank you for flying with…*

Sharply observant, morbidly funny, loved to stab him where it hurt — ugh, that's what he's hitching himself to.

A slumbering guilt twitched in the darker recesses of his mind, because for all his steps towards securing a legally and financially comfortable arrival for the baby, he wasn't emotionally… *anything.*

He was confused mostly; desperately attached one minute, followed by indifference and even disdain the next.

Most people could reproduce. Some probably shouldn't but did. Only some people could be decent parents. Some people weren't made for it. They disappeared, only to call randomly with unwanted advice or selfish demands. Some parents you almost wished would disappear.

Will might be lucky he never even knew anything else except grandmama and Dave, for all of the man's dubious charms. At least no one ever strapped drugs to him when he was four, or worse.

"Our lives are now divided into the time before and the time after we knew we're to be fathers. People often seek refuge in pragmatism to calm their excitement —or their fears. It's a protective mechanism to allow time to wrap our heads around the idea of being responsible for a life, to take stock of our priorities and adjust our career plans, reframe our self image."

“How do you see yourself?”

Hannibal thought for a moment, then smiled, “Purposeful, and secure in my sense of responsibility.”

*“*Overwhelming *sense of responsibility?” Asked Will in a small voice, because the alpha possessed a trait he was both envious of and found highly suspicious— the superpower to live in the moment with sometimes almost joyous abandon, without losing sight of future consequences.*

The alpha gave him a slow probing look, “Are you burdened, Will?”

There was this weird expectation that having a baby somehow made you physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of parenthood despite everyone knowing plenty of examples to the contrary. The mythos was even worse for omegas nowadays when there was actual biology, biochemistry and neuroscience joining anthropologists in adding to the omega parental stereotype.

“Are you not?”

“It’s the training — occupational side benefit of holding power over life and death — it’s a cardinal sin in medicine to freeze up when you’re holding someone’s beating heart in your hands, even if you’re only assisting,” Hannibal confessed blithely then checked his watch, “The weight of parental obligation is only allowed to hold me hostage during the window scheduled for it — starting… now.*”*

Will stared for a long deadpan moment of silence. Then he sneered, because ha-fucking-ha, very funny.

Hannibal’s eyes gleamed with a withheld chuckle, “Taking responsibilities for consequences is what being an adult means, or at least it does in my world— and you won’t be doing it alone, this adventure will be yours and mine.”

(You will have off-days when I’m fine, and I’ll have bad days when you’re well — between us, someone will always have a hand on the wheel)

The omega gave it a moment to settle, feel the pinky dipping into the tiny pool wobbling inside his ribs to stir it, and then looked away to mutter, “You just insulted half of America— possibly half the world. You definitely insulted every politician.”

Hannibal laughed quietly while shaking his head, ”It’s interesting that your mind went there.”

“Was I supposed to infer something else?”

“I was hoping you’d feel reassured.”

He was. Strangely.

But it was early days yet…

Will opened the front door a crack and peered out cautiously. The mother stood at the rolled down driver's side windows, arms crossed as the man in the car passed money over his shoulder to the boy, who unrolled the note with a cheeky smile and showed it to his mother who rolled her eyes, controlling the twitch of her mouth. The little girl pressed her nose against the window, fogging it up as the car pulled out and disappeared down the street.

Will closed the door, took off his coat and went to get another cup of coffee, using up his caffeine allowance for the day.

He spent the rest of the morning reacclimatising. Where the cups were, which drawer had the soap and the spare toilet rolls, which had the bottle opener and corkscrews, rediscovering the condiments, bath towels and bedding cabinet. Then he slowly unpacked the few things Hannibal had left for him to deal with personally — photos, diplomas, other pertinent paperwork, a Honey Graham Crackers tin box which had been a gag gift from when he joined the department now used to store the wind chime he made in high school and the only thing that might be a family heirloom, an antique bullet for the 1908 Mondragón rifle. He found places for them in the spaces made for him— in the bedroom bureau, the antique filing cabinet due to move into the study, the pigeonholes of Hannibal's regimented laundry room.

Will Graham took walks at 11 AM while imagining how nice it would be to have a dog (Dave, in a move worthy of being a vindictive ass, only got dogs after Will had already moved out) and a short stroll before dinner with Hannibal when everyone else was either inside cooking for dinner, eating dinner or watching TV or both.

He avoided the neighbors — not maliciously, just… purposely — even though Hannibal reassured him they were perfectly civil. The alpha kept cordial relations with those living on the street through the Neighborhood Historical Association, as most residents in the area were owner-occupiers, often needing to swap details for carpenters, painters and other services to help each other maintain their historic homes.

"I mentioned you during the January meeting," Hannibal told him that evening, "There's one other alpha-omega family in the street, in their seventies."

Too old to be interesting gossip, unlike Hannibal and him.

Will investigated the house for code violations, to satisfy his own curiosity as much as an ongoing study he expected to come back to later when contractors resumed work next week after the interruption of Hannibal flying down to NOLA for a full week and a day.

Ducking sideways to avoid the strung-up sausages and salted haunches, he inspected the walk-in pantry with deep scepticism before carefully making his exit to leave the small exhibition of *fine taste* as undisturbed as possible.

Then he frowned at the inside of the fridge which didn't have mayonnaise or grape jelly but plenty of vacuum-sealed chuck, organ meat and jars of collagen concentrate, balanced by a head of savoy that looked almost sculptural in its leafy overflow, purple carrots, blood oranges, Pink Ladies, pomegranates, 'beefsteak' tomatoes and blueberries, rounded out by embalmed packages of cheese and glass-covered platters of sliced cured meats for his snacking convenience.

Hannibal ate a ridiculous amount of protein, even compared to the most barbecue-loving cops he knew. Will was still getting used to this habit of eating meat at every meal but knew he would have to get used to it — most alphas *loved* their proteins, bloodier the better for some.

Will went upstairs, bypassing those empty rooms of hopeful may-bes and future could-bes to revisit the walk-in wardrobe, an intimidating space half the size of the generous master bedroom.

And ended up staring blankly at an entire wall of shelves, drawers and hanger spaces with almost nothing shelved and only a few items hung, patiently awaiting all the clothes, shoes and cufflinks Will didn't own yet. He felt his skin crawl as it finally dawned, just how much it was going to cost to fill— and it *would be filled*— because Hannibal enjoyed dressing him up a little too much.

Annoyance and resignation warred for climate control, cooling and heating that puddle he kept in his ribs till it evaporated and condensed a dozen times as Will went through all the articles of clothing purchased both before and after he had accepted Hannibal's bid, flipping and turning and pulling, looking for the little W and G hooked straight through by that peacocking letter L.

By the end of his house tour/investigation, Will had a headache and collapsed into an armchair to try some light reading, another readily available distraction, only to groan and get back up when the Nokia buzzed with a text reminder to drink the freshly-squeezed bottle of juice left in the fridge. He drank it in grimaced sips like it's medication then ate his very-balanced lunch unenthusiastically, because his headache had turned into a downpour, and nothing felt good or tasted good; even he himself wasn't any *good.* He trudged back to his armchair after tidying up to try gathering up his twisted mind by focusing it on deciphering French but that brought back the headache. Finally he gave up and keeled over on the sofa with Hannibal's camel coat thrown over his head, like a shrouded corpse in this silent house, resting — *waiting, rising like uncooked dough*.

At least there's no sex dungeon.

(He had considered it, no matter how unlikely it may seem. Kind of had to in his line of work, people were complicated, layer cake… Pipes and wires and insulation and secret passages behind even their interior walls…)

But a butler's kitchen and a cellar were to be built into the basement *after* the study and nursery were done.

Out of the corner of his eye in the present, a day short of a proper week into cohabitation, Hannibal's face made a barely there twitch, gaze flicking between the book in the omega's hands and that tender temple, like he could implant a suggestion with the power of his eyes. Will ignored the stare with zero sympathy because he had been told using shopping receipts was *unsightly.*

To dog-ear or not? *Yes*. The book and three others lying on the sofa were marked and stacked back onto the sideboard acting as a temporary bookshelf since the renovations for the study were delayed.

Hannibal sighed under his breath, a slight smile that might be wry acceptance, total surrender or a dish best served cold.

A lot of work had been done on the house in the seven weeks he had been absent, but still the study remained bare. Hannibal was surprisingly blasé about the situation considering how he'd *rued* the absence of a place for his books. But there was nothing anyone could do since the made-to-measure shelves were delayed, the project taken on by a new carpenter after the unexpected disappearance of the original contractor.

"Dinner, you were saying?"

Will picked up his empty mug, his half-empty glass of water, the coasters, discarded apple core wrapped up in tissues and anything else scattered around that he would usually take care of before Hannibal could see it in the evenings.

In the background, the alpha watched him tidy and wipe as if it were performance art, broadcasting his fascination loud enough Will had to resist his self-conscious urge to hunch his shoulders and rush through everything like he's moping up a crime scene.

Will checked the clock on the mantle, "When do we leave?"

There was a car service at half past five to take them for dinner in DC.

He didn't eat Japanese; raw fish honestly didn't do it for him, though he ate just about every other variation of seafood. However, Hannibal insisted that this would broaden his horizons, because there was a lot more to the cuisine than raw fish. And the head chef was also coming to the wedding. Will heard the message loud and clear; think of this as a trial run for the eventual need to be sociable.

They were going to stay overnight in DC because the alpha worried that Will's dinner would revisit with a vengeance if they tried to test it with an hour-long ride home. The biological habitat demonstration unit was unbothered by a glass of wine, but would be severely tested by high turbulence from heaving and hurling and — even temporarily, even for just 5 minutes — its life support systems stuttering and having its nutrient supply chain shorted. It should reassure him that Hannibal cared so much, but instead it made him irritated, *bristly*. The feeling stayed with him like a bad smell.

Will met the eyes of the driver briefly in the rear view mirror when the man checked they were belted and ready to go — middle-aged, beta male, olive-skinned and salt-peppered, slightly nasal from allergies — then closed his eyes when the car engine started, trying to head off the oncoming bout of motion sickness.

Like a compulsion, the alpha's hand covered his as soon as they left the street and rubbed at his naked ring finger. Will's fingers twitched, a subtle fuck-off that's ignored.

He gave back the yellow diamond ring as soon as he handed over the official documentation declaring "Congratulations, it's Human" *i.e.* 'NO statements of commitment in inconvenient jewelry required' and promptly heaved a huge mental sigh of relief at being instantly less attractive for opportunistic robbery.

He's a cop (was a cop) so yeah, he saw those *looks* from his colleagues (ex-colleagues) and the perps they had handcuffed, squirming in hard seats on the one occasion (*and only the once*) he wore the ring in public, which was down at the precinct on the day he resigned. His *finger* had been subject to stunned stares and odd glances, slow calculative once-overs, and one woman even *licked* her lips like she wanted to *swallow* it flesh, bones and all.

The alpha was now looking at a suitable replacement. Will rather hoped he failed; a wedding band was his limit, no self-respecting officer (ex-officer) wore more than that — accessories complicated things when one needs to regularly don gloves or sterile ponchos at crime scenes.

(Oh *mon cher catin,* you won't be wearing those gloves for two years minimum —or are you planning to bring a *baby* along to crime scenes?)

"How was your day?" Hannibal asked as soon as they hit the main roads.

He received his first phone call on the house line, if that was worthy of reporting.

(At least they're not talking about the embarrassing 2AM wake up, choked up and senseless from his first vivid uncomfortable dream since his heat…)

"Did you fall on your head, Mister Graham? Or did you become *northern* overnight?" Miss Delia harrumphed over the receiver, a muffle to her deep voice that told him she had a cigarette dangling from her lips.

It shouldn't be *her* calling *him* to make sure he's still breathing. *One* measly little text message to tell her what she already knew — that his plane didn't fall out of the damn sky on the way to DC *and then nothing*.

Also, *what on earth* with his stupid little 'Still alive, ma'am' with a side of colon and an end bracket! Oh, you young people think that's a *smile*...? Ain't that something.

How's Baltimore? Is he being treated right?

It was growing on him, even if he was still bundled up like it was deep winter, more used to March hitting 75 degrees.

Not exactly something he shared but he had an occupational habit that came out with every alpha he interacted with, a list buried in the depths of his mind he couldn't stop circling and crossing; he began this particular list the moment he agreed to visit Hannibal in December, because there were *requirements* — stable, dependable, kind, resilient etc. you know the usual — and he needed to check twice.

Fortunately, after official cohabitation had begun, Hannibal Lecter displayed no sudden changes in temperament, nor any signs of abnormal possessiveness for an alpha with an expecting mate.

Instead there's mounting evidence that the alpha was taking his role as 'the provider' in their relationship seriously, simultaneously very traditional while entertaining very modern ideals

—or maybe ancient ones—his intellectual deviancy giving him a breadth of mind to be fully comfortable as an alpha who cooked, decorated, hosted and enjoyed his shopping for something more than the delights of conquest, to be whatever his omega needed him to be, to allow Will to evolve into whatever he would become. Plans to take him on a date involving murder dioramas aside, Will had been reassured more than once that they could afford a nanny and even a housekeeper when the time came. This morning he was even given a stack of brochures, graduate criminology programs in the tri-state area:

“Food for thought,” Hannibal winked before casually going back to breakfast, because he knew exactly what Will feared — being made to cook, host, and decorate, and be forced to commit arson in all three areas.

Well, that’s good and all… but was he even a *little* excited?

(Oh it was *exciting*, sliding into bed, being held while wondering if his dreams tonight would finally tune into a channel that unnerved Hannibal. The dreams had only stayed away due to his exhaustion and insomnia, but now he was in Baltimore and *safe*... all bets were off)

Because oh goodness, *she was excited!* Will Graham, perpetual wallflower, who kept testing her with random scrapes and bruises and blood stains on his clothes and treated dates like forensic interviews (it’s not called eavesdropping, it’s called chaperoning, a word he *clearly* didn’t understand) was actually settling down.

You be nice to that young man — *no interrogations*, be nice now, no intimidating him with no stories about flesh-eating bugs or they be having words.

Too late. Hannibal already heard all of them and replied with his own stories of dermestid beetles…

She prayed for this. Sure she prayed for *everyone* at Laurie, but let’s be honest, Will Graham definitely made them angels work overtime. Now, tell her about the wedding planning.

There was this horrible booklet, ominously titled “Get Wed” in embossed antique gold.

Actually there were two horrible booklets, one in carmine and one in ultramarine, *personalised* checklists sent by Ms Justine to keep them on schedule. Mostly him. Because Hannibal was compliant.

Will was tempted daily to take them out from the kitchen’s clutter drawer (currently the wedding stuff drawer) and shove them into the sink drain and let the garbage disposal *eat them*.

But the idea of a plumbing bill for clogging the drain stopped him. He wasn’t sure if boat motor mechanics translated to garbage disposals, even if they both had propellers.

Next week there was *another* fitting, just in case — though Hannibal reassured him that nothing would need adjusting and this was just standard procedure. It was too early for obvious changes, three months too early — maybe four because Will had led an active lifestyle and that made a difference.

He was transforming though… Complexion slowly taking on a milky tenderness in his reflection, lips becoming red-stained, and his natural scent enhanced to be almost irresistibly aromatic to Hannibal, who perked up like a bloodhound in his presence.

But these signs weren't obvious unless someone was looking closely or sniffing carefully, and no one should be close enough to smell anything unless they were family and— Will had always been lovely underneath those panda eyes left by sleep deprivation, dry skin from a lack of *any* moisturiser routine and slightly faded scent from his poor diet and the irregular meal schedule which came with police work...

Just like those church ladies, Hannibal often paid compliments with a generous backhand, thinking himself *so clever* at hiding his judgmental snark.

(Jokes on him. Will was brought up in the south, where polite manners and bitchiness met frequently and colorfully)

Then there were scheduled visits to all the venues so he wasn't going in blind.

(Wait, what *venues*? *Why* ***venues***?)

Besides the main reception at the Peabody Library, there was a post-reception brunch for some 'important guests' at the Kimpton Hotel in DC—

(Hang on, isn't this just *another* reception but calling it something else?)

And a luncheon three days after just for the Sforza relatives at some fancy place with a pavilion and a lake.

(Just *why*?)

Because it was necessary, laying the foundation for the future well-being of the son or daughter they would have.

It wouldn't matter now, but at age 4, happiness was being invited for playdates and birthdays because your parents attended each other's weddings. Then at age 17, happiness would be a summer vacation at Lake Como, Italy, at your late grandmother's sprawling ancestral home, frolicking around the palazzo gardens with cousins, a reassurance of one's roots in that strange time when you're preparing to leave the nest.

So to answer Miss Delia: his wedding was going to be lovely (Lavish, Obnoxious, Very Expensive, Lamentably Yummy —Hannibal would only accept delicious food at his reception) and he didn't know about the honeymoon because Hannibal was going to surprise him (actually Will forgot until *this very moment* that honeymoons were a thing that came with weddings — sigh) and a contractor was coming by next week to paint the room set aside for the nursery in neutral calming shades of greens and beige—

A gently amused Hannibal interrupted that a more accurate description would be ecru or perhaps eggshell.

"Or beige," he conceded when the omega raised a scornful eyebrow.

Miss Delia's quiet satisfaction through the phone line had been as clear as if she was right in front of him, smiling a shit-eating "Told you so."

"Then Monsieur Proust visited me for a few hours," he concluded bluntly, and went back to breathing slowly through his nose, managing his motion sickness by closing his eyes again, intently focused on the zips, lows and trills of violin virtuosos doing splits, tumbles and flips to Paganini, whoever that was.

"What did you do today?" He finally asked after a wave of nausea passed, still getting used to the phrase in his mouth, like a foreign tongue.

The alpha had his usual morning of regulars coming in for their weekly or fortnightly, followed by a special work lunch with Doctor Suimetharom and his cabal of neurobiologists, neurologists, pediatricians, geneticists and psychologists in adolescent development. The team had been researching the frontal cortex for a decade now on and off between their other responsibilities, and were stuck on what exactly arrested frontal cortex development — an oddity unique to human brains.

"Your brain has ended construction," Hannibal noted warmly with a touch of wonder as he reached over to caress a lock of hair, as gently as he might stroke the omega's brain, "Your myelination finally complete."

"Guess that excuse won't roll in court anymore."

The alpha chuckled, a little purr to his murmur, "Yes, you now possess full executive function, long-term planning skills, gratification postponement, impulse control and emotional regulation."

Will felt his mouth twist, "Not sure about those last two, think they forgot the scaffolding."

And Hannibal was being overly optimistic in his opinion — possess the full skill-set of an adult brain? That presumed nothing had interfered with the process — and who in this world grew up in controlled laboratory conditions…

Apparently adolescent experiences of trauma and discovery, love with rejection, success or failure, happiness plus despair, and all their nuances played an unexpectedly more crucial role in constructing the frontal cortex than the team expected. Satisfyingly, they also found preliminary confirmation that the old sayings 'Every weapon has its counter' 'A sword with a guard but no sheath will never find rest' 'Alphas can conquer but not rule a throne alone for a day longer than their victory parade' et cetera were onto something — alpha teens responded to stressors very differently, seemingly dependent on one crucial point: if there was an omega in their life, and not even a family member, just a fairly good school friend or close neighbor would do.

Hannibal was only interested in what this meant for free will and the shaping of an individual's moral compass.

"Just fascinating," the alpha mused, thoughts temporarily elsewhere.

“A juggernaut of appetites,” he drawled, at his most sardonic, because he remembered being a teenager; and more importantly, Will remembered other teenagers, “constrained by the flimsiest of frontal cortical brakes.”

Hannibal chuckled again, a low feline rumble tickling the omega’s hair, “Were you ever a naughty boy?”

“Were *you*?”

The answer was a mischievous whisper against his cheek, “Yes, very.”

Will made a muffled sound, eyes flying open as familiar lips landed on his own, surprised that Hannibal was stealing a kiss while smirking at him, clearly in a whimsical mood.

A few seconds later, Hannibal drew back and settled comfortably into the leather seat, not a hair out of place and a little more smug as he licked his moist lips. His hand found Will’s again and curled over it.

“As far as the research can tell, there’s no neurological center for what we would call the conscience.”

Human brains needed over a dozen years to formulate a framework of neurons and synapses for deciding right and wrong, because it was just *that* difficult.

“Thou shalt not kill,” He muttered, with less disquiet than he felt and more vitriol than he did, “Unless it’s one of *those people*, and then you get a medal.”

Or a mate with an impending parturition and a new zip code.

In the background, the violin music soared into a crescendo; Paganini wasn’t a composer, he realised, but obviously the devil in disguise — these recording violinists must have tortured themselves to grind out these melodies.

Don’t lie, *unless the pay off was worth it or it’s a profoundly good act…*

Will tentatively leaned across the armrest dividing the backseat into Hannibal’s shoulder, still trying to get used to having someone to reach for.

Hannibal chuckled, his amusement deep enough that Will felt the vibration travel into him through where they touched, “The grand finale of frontal cortical construction.”

Rationalizations and hypocrisies.

“Laws to be followed…” he murmured into wool, his eyes staring unseeing at the passing scenes of dusk through the car window, “Edicts to be ignored.”

“Impositions to be resisted,” Hannibal nuzzled his hair and whispered, “No fugitives in my attic. Close your eyes, Will.”

He drifted into a half-doze, feeling sick but safe, to the lullabies of the devil’s instrument.

“Will destroyed one of my Noritake tea sets.”

Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier’s pen drifted to a stop at the non-sequitur, her initial instinct to steer the conversation back to the alpha’s views on marriage coming to an abrupt halt mid-breath.

After only a moment of hesitation, the psychiatrist chose to field the distraction that had been tossed her way. With Hannibal Lecter, it was often better to follow the script.

“To what purpose?”

The post-dream emotional episode in the middle of the night had been an exception. Or so she had thought. She wrote — ‘domestic property damage?’ — though there was probably no relation, just in case.

Hannibal cocked his head thoughtfully, “I suppose the irreconcilable reality of people.”

An earlier session came back to her:

“*La terre est couverte de gens qui ne méritent pas qu’on leur parle*.”

She smiled wryly, “The earth swarms with people not worth talking to — Voltaire.”

“And Will, when I asked to see him again at the end of our first date,” reminisced Hannibal.

The omega was secretly a misanthrope, his empathy ensuring either instant connection, a rarity, or instant disinterest, more common, and on occasion, disdain. This was not to say the omega was habitually rude, just cynical, suspicious and defensive; it’s what made him hard to catch and worth the effort to keep.

Hannibal never feared hard work — especially not now when his efforts paid such sweet rewards…

Did the reward still taste sweet?

“How did it make you feel?” She asked slowly.

“I find it reassuring.”

There’s a touch of reprove in his gaze — *tsk, tsk*, did she really think him capable of starting a dispute over something as meaningless as broken crockery?

She replied with a droll tilt of her head.

Hannibal Lecter was many things, but forgiving he was not, when someone came through and disturbed the order — or purposeful chaos — he had set in place. That tea set was part of an order. Noritake porcelain was not expensive, it was probably on the lowest tier of what filled Hannibal's cupboards; however, considering the younger man's tastes and habits, it was probably special in its own way, perhaps part of a limited collection or imbued with subjective commemorative value.

"Reassuring how?"

"That he's comfortable."

Comfortable.

Her eyebrows were tempted to waver but she marshalled them to remain natural.

"In…being destructive…?"

"That he is comfortable in taking what he needs — it's just a tea set, after all, it exists to be used," Hannibal had an affable air to him as he lazily crossed his legs.

Apparently Will Graham's 'needs' included destruction of private property.

For some odd reason, his statement 'exists to be used' struck her more than the above, though she couldn't put her finger on why. Rationally, it may be the incongruity that stuck out — it was one thing to use a tea set for drinking tea and quite another to use it for anger management — but Hannibal had always been dark in wit, and so there was surely a meaning hidden somewhere, even if just a little joke only for himself.

"Was there a trigger for the incident?" She asked plainly, a step short of asking if he had done something.

It wouldn't surprise her. Lecter was the most *curious* person of her acquaintance. And with their history, she knew to remain aloof to what her eyes and ears told her, refusing to attribute his acceptance of and— going by the fact he hadn't opened with this— successful recovery from any relationship fissures created by the omega's temper tantrum to 'emotional maturity.'

"I imagine that it was a slow crescendo," mused Hannibal.

Yes, she imagined so. The alpha was a self-confessed sadist.

It was only last week she subtly observed Hannibal's attempts to help himself to the omega's social isolation. His response had been dinner reservations with Will to show off, tickets to Stravinsky to further parade his domestic bliss and throwing a weekend luncheon to show off some more.

"I asked him to call his father and make arrangements for his flight and stay. Evidently the conversation didn't end well."

Or perhaps the pressure of being Lecter's obsession finally got to him, the omega regressed to cope and needed an immediate outlet of emotional displacement.

The phone call was the trigger but it wasn't the build-up.

She tapped her pen tip several times on the half-filled page, contemplative.

Lecter frequently lied by omission… So while she had no doubt that she had the surface facts — there was a phone call to the beta father-in-law, it didn't end happily, a tea set was destroyed — there was a gap in the how, when and where, which would affect how the situation ought to be interpreted.

Was the tea set in a cabinet and deliberately dragged out for its demise? Was it sitting on a table, already steeping tea? On a kitchen counter, being readied for use? It mattered at least to her — was the tea set just conveniently available, an unfortunate victim of circumstance, or specifically targeted?

Her colleague enjoyed his agency and having influence, for all his philosophical flirtations with determinism; she suspected a larger role on his part than simply pointing out that Will had fallen behind on his wedding planning obligations.

"Why did he destroy the tea set?"

While it struck her as the first crack in that delicate porcelain construction called love — where one hair-line fracture could lead to more cracks, and to follow this metaphor to the end, possibly the complete disintegration of structural integrity in the construction — Hannibal seemed to find it… *endearing* was the best term.

She examined his face with furrowed brows, unable to read beyond those public emotions he displayed.

"It was the only way to perform an exorcism promptly," explained Lecter, in a tone as though this should be obvious to her — no it *really wasn't*.

She didn't bother to point this out. Hannibal was very skilled in asking questions and manipulating concepts until whatever he said or did almost seemed reasonable while everyone else lived in self-denial.

"What did Will wish to purge?"

"That storm of love, hate and pain that can only ever be drawn out of us by our birth families, who grabbed us by our Achilles' heel before we even knew we had one, wielding the power to always hit us in that one spot where it matters."

In this case, Will Graham's insecurity that 'omegas get by on their backs' — something she had picked up early on but Hannibal struggled to due to his lack of personal experience with deep-seated insecurities and the sexually vulnerable.

Bedelia Du Maurier allowed herself a moment to admire the oratorical talents of her colleague, astute yet so lyrical — actually, he sounded a little rehearsed but she imagined the original recipient was Will Graham, and she was just getting a facsimile — then allowed

herself another moment to shake her metaphorical head in disappointment at the beta father-in-law who clearly did not understand in the slightest how much was involved in the delicate physiological and neurochemical interplay happening between his omega progeny and her fellow alpha; Hannibal Lecter was surprising her almost every single session after years of the same limp-eyed calculative conversations with shallow smiles — and all because of Will Graham.

“I reassured him that it was perfectly fine,” Hannibal met her probing gaze, brown orbs merry with disproportionate amusement, voice low as he added conspiratorially, “I even promised to provide as many tea sets as required for future incidents.”

Mi casa su casa, Hannibal Lecter-style.

Rather than viewing the incident as a warning of possible emotional instability, Will Graham had kept his halo and his mystique, perhaps even enhancing his allure in Hannibal’s eyes.

Du Maurier hid her sense of disquiet behind her brief mirthless smile. She uncrossed then recrossed her legs in the opposite direction, replaying the last few minutes in her mind. Was it a cute anecdote or was Lecter encouraging his omega’s sublimation of violent emotions into destructive behaviours? Was this acceptance of your partner’s vulnerability and anger without becoming defensive like in a good healthy relationship? Or was it normalising maladaptive coping strategies as acceptable outlets?

First, the desire to burn a book, and now, the actual destruction of crockery…

Today it was the tea set, but tomorrow?

“Have there been other incidents of dysregulation?” She posed, curious if the alpha would answer her.

Sometimes he did, sometimes he deflected. And though she knew his pattern now, even with this awareness guiding their interactions, it remained a challenge to pick up on the subtle manipulations of perceptions and presumptions funnelling her towards assumptions he desired her to fall for.

Hannibal smiled, demure though his eyes continued to gleam with mirth, “Will has always been very observant. Everyday with him at my side has been an unexpected delight.”

And there it was, that little gaze to the right, one reverent inhale, a blissful exhale, mouth tilting up at the corners:

Hannibal Lecter, besotted edition.

Her colleague took his lovely Will out for fancy meals around Baltimore, exclusive spots with local politicians, corporate lawyers, financial big names trying to avoid reporter stakeouts common to the DC fine dining scene and other self-important people — where the omega would treat every other alpha present in the room like *persona non grata* to their everlasting disappointment, a fringe benefit Lecter enjoyed immensely alongside his primary amusement — to have those special moments where their eyes met across the crisp white

tablecloth in dark humor and in almost perfect synchronicity, they would gaze wryly after the waiter who rudely abandoned their table to rush towards a red-faced man in a suit that barely covered his bulging gut — and Will Graham would pick up his menu to mutter under his breath, “Hardly surprising the waiters rush over, given he looks one *kobe* steak away from a heart attack.”

Some days, even she wanted to meet Hannibal’s unicorn…

The omega had been in Baltimore for over eleven days if she had her dates right. In that span of time, Hannibal had attended three therapy sessions of varying session lengths on different days at different times for each one, so as to accomodate for his new routine of domesticity. Having his inamorato under the same roof seemed to have mollified Hannibal in some way, their sessions now touching upon the younger alpha’s inner life when previously the man only ever discussed his patients and psychiatry-related or philosophical topics, interspersed with short shallow anecdotes of social events and sexual affairs. Despite the greater inclusion of topics up for discussion, they ultimately all related back to Will Graham — Hannibal was very predictable in his obsession.

With the rate of accumulation for these anecdotes, she had already seen Hannibal’s besotted expression many times and suspected she’ll see it many more — actually she hoped to see it often and for a very long time.

She wondered if it would ever be less fascinating.

For Will Graham, these plus or minus eleven days were… probably fine. There had been the dinner in DC, glossed over as a pleasant outing, the leisurely meals in Baltimore’s finest establishments — Hannibal didn’t eat outside by his own volition, period, almost religiously dedicated to his own cooking but evidently that rule existed to be broken for he was having too much fun people-watching with his beloved — and the usual activities involved in wedding planning.

Hannibal had described some poignant conversations with his omega about mortality, Will’s adorable anxieties about meeting the neighbors and starting a family, and his even stronger desire to live a long and prosperous life — so the alpha could fulfil his marital obligations for years to come and shepherd his beloved Will for as long as the world would give them. Which sounded romantic on the surface but … disturbed her to be frank.

To this end Hannibal was in the process of reviewing medical books, updating himself on standard practices for the sake of keeping his surgical license while also reading up on new ideas and techniques, logging his professional development hours with his typical overachieving enthusiasm — perhaps more enthusiasm than usual because all of it would be useful in many small ways and may become lifesaving if something were to ever happen to his Will and their non-existent children.

“Weddings are considered a major stressor, among the ten most stressful life events that humans experience, due to the immensity of commitment implied, and the possible ramifications of a future retraction.”

Not that a retraction existed in the vocabulary of a *confarreatio*. However the removal of the option to divorce could either be a hindrance or an advantage. While it saved one from some fears like the future public humiliation of a break-up — never a private affair in their small community — it also aroused the pre-wedding jitters of someone like Will Graham, who needed his independence like he needed air, despite his strong urge to connect as per his omega directive.

“I know,” Hannibal nodded with a sigh, “Which is why I moved the luncheon to this weekend and offered to cancel our evening to a performance of Stravinsky.”

An offer that was not taken, she guessed, and probably was disingenuous in the first place — the omega was frugal, he wouldn’t waste the few hundred dollars already spent on the tickets unless he had a good reason, and Lecter knew this.

“Does Will enjoy Stravinsky?”

Hannibal chuckled softly, charmed rather than derisive, “He didn’t even know who Stravinsky was when I brought it up.”

“It’ll be his first time?” She asked like she was surprised but she wasn’t. Not really.

Will Graham had the same weakness of all bright young omegas plucked from their poor beginnings, best captured in that old Chinese saying: the poor study while the rich practice.

“Yes.” Hannibal beamed, “Hopefully the first of many.”

Will Graham clutched at his coat as he exited the building, a blast of spring wind hitting him squarely in the face and ruffling his hair. Behind him he heard Sabine Beaufremont curse in something that sounded German as she clutched at her beret while also reaching into her handbag for sunglasses. The street was busy with the wandering lunch crowd, traffic moving slower than when they had arrived two hours ago. Will took a deep gulp of the air and wondered if he would be able to walk to Hannibal’s office in time to meet up if he walked fast enough. Before he could even turn around to ask Sabine for directions though, a familiar-looking Bentley in a shade to the left of black smoothly came to a stop in front of him and rolled down its automatic windows.

“You look lost, may I offer you a lift?” Hannibal Lecter smiled demurely with all of his hefty charm from behind the steering wheel.

Will regarded that flirtatious smile with his most unimpressed stare. Delighted at the surprise, Sabine had the door open and completed her customary three kisses before he could even ask Hannibal about the fate of his last appointment because – Will checked his watch – it should have run for another half hour. Their flirty conversation in French was so fast he couldn’t

catch a single word before she was already ushering him inside and shutting the door with a promise to see him tomorrow.

Will tiredly pulled on his seatbelt before slumping back as the window glided shut and finally cut off the noisy street, absolutely exhausted despite not having to do much than flip through picture books to confirm everything and stand still for long periods of time. Hannibal threw a glance at the rear view mirror to frown at the taxi which had rudely blown its horn at them before steering the car smoothly into traffic.

“How was your morning?” The alpha asked lightly, in his usual good mood. Will didn’t even bother to dignify that with a response.

Despite being forewarned, he had crawled out of bed to the shock of Sabine Beaufremont waiting on the sofa in riding boots, mid-sip into her coffee with the saucer somehow magically balanced on a knee and reading a sheet of newspaper she had folded to be paperback-size. She had been overly amused at the sight of him hastily re-wrapping his bathrobe, that same warm effusive delight about her as at their first meeting. This time however her smile was the kind you used upon a child who rudely kept you waiting for over an hour but the lack of intent in the faux pas added an innocent charm, so Sabine could only smile in the end. Plus she’s been forewarned and received a suitable apology from Hannibal, who was equally culpable if Will was too tired to get out of bed in the mornings.

He had considered correcting her for one moment — that he was wrung out from a nightmare, waking up only to throw up, so Hannibal had been running around cleaning the bedroom floor and getting him washed up before feeding him broth and putting him to bed in all his minty misery — until he realised that Hannibal had *covered for him* in deliberately apologising for *his omega* sleeping in and Will wanted to continue the misunderstanding, because it was better than having people know he was ‘troubled,’ a label that tended to follow people, while being seen as newly mated and unable to keep their hands to themselves was something to be snickered over and quickly forgotten.

He didn’t resist when she made him go back upstairs to shower *thoroughly* and redress *properly.* His wool coat had her delightedly running a hand over his arm while murmuring about the vintage cashmere. Apparently one could no longer buy this particular weave of fabric, as the small sect of nuns who weaved such ‘delicate luxuries’ had been squashed into extinction by the tank of authoritarianism. Will remembered feeling the coat grow tighter along the shoulders at the knowledge.

They had their breakfast at the neighborhood coffee shop, a Tudor revival with an attached courtyard, cordial conversation flowing in mutual understanding of their relationship. Politely said, she was his guide to Baltimore City; in less charitable terms, she was the matrimonial drill sergeant, there to get him to his fittings and venue walkthroughs and whatever confarreatio cockamamie required his attention.

As soon as they were seated she requested a *café crème* which had the young waiter scratching his metaphorical head because it wasn’t on the menu. She had gotten her coffee, because the barista at least recognised the order.

She took two sips, made a tiny frown and put it decisively down upon the saucer. Then she ordered a latte and pushed it away after drinking a tentative mouthful, flagging the waiter for an Americano, a *renversé* — ah, that's what you people call a café au lait but it's milk first, espresso second — and a cappuccino, yes one of each, whole milk, organic if you have it, *merci vielmal, Gopferteckel*. She alternated between the cups like they were having a dialogue inside her mouth but would ultimately not finish any of them.

Will had silently eaten his breakfast omelette and eyed the cups of coffee in varying states of almost empty to almost full, wondering how and why they were disappointing.

The waiter eventually carried over another small outdoor table for the growing collection of cups, when she requested a mug of warm frothed organic whole milk, and another glass of the same milk but simply warmed not frothed, for *science*.

In the back of his mind, Will had calculated how much he ought to tip the waiter for his good attitude towards everything and suddenly understood why Hannibal had folded a small wad of twenties into his coat's inner pocket when it was hung on the valet stand.

She didn't ask if he'd settled in nor how the rest of the evening went after she had left — this morning was more than enough evidence that things were well. She first talked about the wedding details she had finalized on Hannibal's behalf, all of which went in one ear and out the other except for a few details involving him, if Will was being frank.

Then she had squinted up at the sky and slipped on her sunglasses, sipping her five drinks simultaneously as she began to reminisce about those giant hats her omega female ancestors had worn to balls (terrible time in history when they tried to copy-n-paste beta *dernier cri*) until the Great War killed off millinery with shortages. Apparently those hats had become so ridiculous at one point the wearer couldn't even get close to anyone without someone being blinded by a hat brim or punched in the throat. She also told him how her great-great-grandmother Anaïs had flung hers down the staircase in a fit of pique so she could kiss all her friends properly at the Opernhaus Ball in Zürich. It was completely irrelevant, couldn't be more useless, but somehow got the message across that Sabine Le Vert was going to be her usual self, and she would appreciate it if he would *stop* with this awkward play-acting at niceness by being as quiet as a church mouse and calling her *ma'am* — though the *ma'am* part was rather adorable.

But whatever else he was, he wasn't meek, she knew he wasn't because Hannibal found nothing else more *boring*.

"I don't like pet names," he had said, because he could tell she was that *type* and then, "I like dogs."

"I have two cats, Burmese, in champagne and sable, named Champagne and Sable," she replied smoothly, then with a smile that dared him to complain, "I like my sobriquets."

Then they went back to talking about the wedding. Well she talked while he mumbled.

"I'm glad you like her," Hannibal chuckled and then in a placating tone, as if he thought the omega's ongoing irritation was about the coffee situation, "It's the *milk.* Happens every time

she returns home."

Because milk produced by cows grazing on the slopes of the Swiss Alps was *better* and comparison really was the thief of joy.

Will recalled the only cup of coffee she had actually finished… What kind of milk did Hannibal use? He didn't put enough milk in his coffee to notice.

Milk…

A memory stirred in the back of his mind, rising like an air bubble eager to pop; a beta female in her late thirties who had poisoned her ex with antifreeze… Will shifted uncomfortably, the image of her stare from across the interview table, the dark swallow of her unblinking eyes fixed on him, each puff of her cigarette in languid slow drags, their idle conversation (you don't smoke, probably a good idea, if she wasn't so addicted she'd never have another phallic symbol near her mouth ever again) as they waited to see if she was a murderer, or just an attempted murderer. She knew he had been sent to keep her calm, because omegas were calming — he was lovely to look at, she had to admit – how nice, for the precinct to use such a precious resource on her.

But if she had his pretty face, she smiled with a smile that wasn't a smile, if she had his halo... She stupidly compromised all her life; she had even compromised on marriage, because hey, people lived together now, mutual respect was enough. He took, she put up with it; annoying but she moved on. He took, again, and she kept compromising, loyal to something not there. *Betraying herself.* Then right when her biological clock countdown well and truly hit the eleventh hour, he found a cow whom he was willing to buy for milk. Who gave a shit about the cow he'd been milking for free until now.

To add insult to injury, he also wanted a share of her assets — *fair compensation* for all those years *wasted* — to fund his new milk cow.

That heartless bastard had it coming, really.

But you're different, she said post-divulgement into the dead silence as Will leaned across the table to light her next cigarette, because she wasn't to use a lighter in her current state of mind. Her red eyes roamed over his face as her expression flickered between desire for him (not him but a child that never was) to be him (to be young again) and *contempt* for him; for his innocence, his *squandering* of his value, tempting fate with every criminal he met.

"*Someone would definitely scoop you up," her eyes had burned bright carnivorous red through the balletic swirls of smoke, "The creamiest tastiest milk one could buy."*

Will ran a hand over his brow and rubbed at his stinging eyes as the old memory and the emotional baggage that came with it sank back in the depths of his mind, leaving behind the stink of cigarette smoke and a vague unease. He gave a little start at the familiar touch on his thigh, followed by the predictable touch of his still-flat stomach, a gentle possessive splay of fingers he was slowly learning to accept and sometimes even enjoy. He followed the hand back to the owner and appraised the general air of contentment, of *anticipation*. His throat swallowed with a click, reminded of what day it was. The familiar sensation of nausea

crawled up his esophagus. Will swallowed again and tried to breathe through it, tried to focus on something else than his hopes and his fears, all mashed up together into an unrecognisable mess. Distantly he heard Hannibal ask if he had finished picking out his witnesses.

"...Tell me your options, perhaps I can help whittle it down."

"If you do that, we'll have to make do with mannequins for my side."

Or dig up a few graves.

He needed to buy a better photo frame for his grandmama's wedding portrait, for that picture of Haschen in dress uniform, and a few more. Happy faces etched in flimsy chemical inks on plastic-coated paper; too bad ghosts didn't make head count.

" *Will* ."

His head spun at the sound. The alpha never said his name all by itself, the sound of it now, a monosyllable of emotion…

"Lost in thought again," Hannibal observed with gentle teasing, "Sabine said you ran into Belinda Downes."

"Hmmm," Will hummed in possibly the most sarcastic tone he could manage, feeling almost grateful at the immediacy of irritation, how it diverted his anxieties into externalities.

The beta hailing from South Carolina had seen Sabine Beaufremont's elegant self in the coffee shop courtyard and taken the spare chair uninvited, introducing herself to him with all the subtly of a bull in a china store, proclaiming that she had heard from so-and-so that he was from Louisiana, how wonderful, both from the south — and several state lines away from each other. With her intrusion came three other betas, who *all* apparently had interacted with Hannibal in the past at one charity event or another and were aware of the wedding even if only Belinda was to attend as Doctor Downes' plus one.

After being introduced, more than one had prattled on about how lovely it was to finally meet him, having heard about him from her friend Timothy/Sandra/Brenda (lie, half-lie, pathological liar that last one) who had met him at Mrs Komeda's New Years party and somehow swiftly turned to sharing stories (unsubstantiated gossip) they had heard about how Hannibal was a scandalous bachelor, not even taking much of an interest in the Ostara Gala — which had Will snorting under his breath because that was the modern equivalent of a matchmaking ball and wasn't open to betas so how would they know anything. Not surprising in hindsight, they smiled at each other, Doctor Lecter was such a cultured man, it was natural he would be so particular — so *why is he so interested in you*, the slight tick in their brows said as their eyes had flicked up and down his entire form, his clothes, the antique watch that Hannibal had gifted him after throwing away his old one and focused on his face intently with the fervency of groupies.

Well, they were both fans of autopsies and he was bleeding and carrying a gun when they met, guess alphas with surgical backgrounds find that attractive. There was some pleasure to be had in seeing four smiling symmetrically beautiful faces frozen in incomprehension

because what he said was so outside of the well-defined parameters of their world that it had overloaded their programmed responses. Sabine Beaufremont had thrown him an exasperated smile before quickly explaining that he had worked for the NOPD, specifically specializing in homicides, telling a needlessly romanticized version of how Hannibal had met him.

Then one of them perked up and told him that she watched CSI *all the time* and asked him what was that thing they sprayed to find blood stains that had been wiped away and if he had some — because yes, *anyone* in law enforcement just carried luminol around at all times. He had shut that one down by saying that no, he didn't usually use luminol unless in very special circumstances because it destroyed DNA, which was, you know, usually important in closing cases, especially homicides.

Then Belinda Downes asked where his accent was, chiding that he didn't have to hide his accent, looking almost proud as she proclaimed that her *darling Benny* liked her accent. Surely Doctor Lecter liked the accent, don't be shy now, she had smiled, smug because she believed she had cracked the code on why Hannibal Lecter hadn't entertained any of the options paraded his way — he was such an educated well-mannered alpha it made sense that he wanted someone brought up in a place where courtesy and tradition still mattered and not someone from around these parts.

Will scrubbed a hand across his face, wishing he could scrub his mind of everything he had noticed this morning and didn't want to notice, niggling at him like a pebble in his shoe. His general discomfort mingled with his disdain at the unpleasant morning run-in and devolved into utter contempt, "She asked if there was a security situation in the Seychelles because she's heard there's trouble in the area."

If there was any sentence worthy of air quotes, he had just said it. He exhaled, a tiny derisive laugh gushing out when Hannibal turned to him in morbid fascination. Their eyes met, and Will felt the pool in his ribs spin a little more.

His smile was more of a grimace than a smile as he recounted with almost physical pain, "One of them asked where exactly Seychelles was in the Middle East."

And right after, another one with slightly more common sense, reassured Belinda that surely it's safe or her husband, Doctor Downes (who was either a saint, a masochist, very special or a flagrant philanderer) wouldn't be taking her there for a holiday. At this point, Will almost wondered aloud how many affairs Doctor Downes had for him to feel the need to make such a grand gesture in compensation but somehow managed to keep it professional. Instead he had suggested it might be a good experience for her to be kidnapped while holidaying, so she might get a tan and eat some more local food, take in some more local sights. They had stared at him like he had just declared he was going to bomb city hall and Sabine Beaufremont almost choked on a biscotti from holding in her laughter. Will didn't even know if he could laugh at this point because Belinda Downes and all of them were in their thirties yet not even embarrassed when the older woman explained in a pleasant tone of voice that the Seychelles was a group of islands in the Indian Ocean and nowhere near the Middle East, and while it was nice to meet them all, Will had a very busy morning with her, very important business, wedding stuff to take care of. Oh, of course, yes, please go about your day, they understood completely –

“Might be the only part they understood,” muttered Will darkly.

Behind the steering wheel, Hannibal did a valiant job of not laughing. He met the alpha’s wry gaze and felt his mouth twitch despite his irritation. The upcoming ultrasound appointment still hovered over him but the weight of his secret agonies lightened the longer he spent in the car, the longer they talked, the longer he sat in the presence of someone who was equally invested in this.

Perhaps more invested, a little voice whispered…

Hannibal thought for a moment, then smiled, “Purposeful, and secure in my sense of responsibility.”

With a note of schadenfreude, Hannibal said innocently, “I’m glad you had the chance to meet them.”

“They’re all *very*…” Will pursed his lips, looking for the right word because ‘pretty’ was an understatement yet also a gross misrepresentation since it implied sweetness and innocence and *not* whatever those four had been, “…Very pageant-material.”

And very disturbingly similar in their clothing, color-scheme, hair styles and interests, a well-manicured herd, all humble-bragging about their headaches dealing with the housekeeper/babysitter, their latest exorbitant purchase and asking questions about his clothes and nodding along like they understood any of the terminological convolutions that came from Sabine Beaufremont’s lips as she waxed poetics about Hannibal’s sartorial taste. Will had listened and even paid attention, increasingly surreal as he picked up on the undertones — everything on him was purposeful, filled with Hannibal Lecter’s intent, an alpha’s promise — *keep your hands to yourself.*

“Poor sense of direction aside, I hope everyone was courteous.”

Will felt his last dregs of disdain turn into a familiar warmth, and couldn’t help his smile as he rolled his neck and massaged it, not surprised to hear it click after holding still for so long for his fitting, “Why? Going to defend my honor?”

But the man already had, all without a single word. A silent preemptive strike laid out in ‘delicate luxuries,’ in the naked stitching of his new clothes broadcasting their unique personalised construction.

“If you dress well, no one notices what you do,” Hannibal murmured against his cheek as he slid his hands under the suit jacket and around Will’s waist, checking on something or maybe just an excuse to touch him, “Only what you wear.”

A phalanx of two, an aegis with room to grow, more shields to share.

Will ran a hand through his hair, glad that none of the ladies he had the misfortune of running into were counted among Hannibal’s actual social circle except for the Downes, who were only on the periphery, a professional association rather than a personal one. Catching each

other's eyes, they regarded one another in a meaningful silence, fond commiserations and something playful unfurling between them like a warm spring breeze.

Quid pro quo had been their beginning but it wouldn't carry them further.

"Have you ever heard of Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin?" Hannibal asked over the gentle refrains of classic music playing, his eyes maintaining the twinkle of flirtation even as they went about washing up, "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es. Probably his most famous aphorism."

How terribly appropriate. He took the water goblet handed to him and began to dry it, feeling the strange tug of a smile across his mouth. *Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are.* For Hannibal, the traditional *genre* of recipes and cookbooks usually reminded him of medical texts, which was just such *an odd* connection that it had him shaking his head in helpless bemusement.

BEEP. The machine went on.

"Okay, daddy, on the recliner you go," the friendly beta technician said, her thick dark hair braided into Princess Leia buns, making her look like a Japanese doll with her rounded face and slender almond eyes.

Daddy, he inhaled sharply, swallowed against the warmth that plumed up from deep in his rib cage, a lagoon forming in the space between his spinning pool growing larger everyday and his inner sea. His soon-to-be epithet, one he actually cared for out of all the ones attached to 'omega'; a soubriquet he wanted to claim, was terrified of claiming. Deep in his mind, beyond the memory ocean that was both gentle and mad, he saw the pieces come together, felt the sticky magnetic sweetness; his arms outstretched, an exaggerated smile as he fell to his knees, the kind of welcome he gave the old man's rambunctious mismatched mutts but warmer, deeper, sweeter, *more* – can I have a hug? *Hi daddy.* Will Graham buried his face in a tiny shoulder, in sweet hair, dark and curled as his own or limp and straight, not quite brown, too dark for blonde. Not just a warm squished thing the size of a butternut.

(He had planted a magical bean inside him)

"A plethora of consumables, a time limit, a set of instructions, an outcome," Hannibal listed in a light tone, his eyes crinkled at the edges, "Plus background knowledge to understand why you're doing what you're doing and make appropriate substitutions and workarounds. And of course, both genres place a premium on accuracy."

Because the omission of a single word or line could make or destroy the final result.

For example, Uncle Robertas' disastrous first attempt at making roasted pheasant for his nephew's birthday — without realizing the bird needed to be thoroughly plucked first because the recipe *never explicitly said so.*

"I'll never forget what he removed from the oven," the alpha's eyes glowed with mirth, the sharpness of his cheekbones magnified under the kitchen ceiling spotlights, "The roasted pheasant was *well*-marinated and completely horrifying in its hot steaming sarcophagus of feathers."

His appointment was the last one of the day. The clinic usually tried to reserve the last appointment of the day for omega patients to give them extra time and privacy. Babies were awfully slippery at this age, bouncing all over the place, especially if it's an alpha – the most slippery type of foetus. Those lovely ultrasound pictures were a mere few seconds of stillness, among hundreds of seconds filled with movement; yes, at this age, babies spend all their time flipping and tumbling like the worst/best of Paganini's cadenzas, Hannibal agreed with a soft chuckle.

Will tried to muster up a reply but instead just spluttered and began to laugh, feeling something balloon in his chest because *that had to be— that was just —*

For a moment he was there, standing where Hannibal stood, staring down at the well-done pheasant fresh out of the oven ("Well-done," he heard Hannibal intone in that understated way of his, usually when he was making fun, mutual mockery between the strange philosophical conversations, shared petty irritations and bittersweet revelations) smoking from within its *hot steaming sarcophagus* of singed feathers, soggy with boiling marinade, surrounded by stunned faces and a deadly silence.

The atmosphere was relaxed and amiable, the conversation more professional repartee between colleagues than the careful chatter between a doctor, a technician and an expectant parent who was also an alpha anticipating a firstborn — the sonographer was here to help Doctor Morales if the baby was hyperactive, the alpha ones so often were. No one expected anything to be wrong – the patient was young, healthy, *omega*, no history of medical problems except for some superficial work injuries, all cleared up without lingering chronic complications. Even modern medical science deferred to nature's custom biological habitat demonstration unit when it came to the matter of gestation. Everyone else was all smiles. He was the only one holding his breath, waiting for each pronouncement of measurements taken, for each declaration of normalcy, waiting for proof of life.

It took five minutes for Will to calm down, his breathy laugh wracking his entire body and making him slump helplessly back against a cabinet because it's so *absurd.* He had always imagined the alpha's family to be just like Hannibal himself — prim and proper perfectionists, always dressed to the nines — and the *image* of them standing there *frozen,* staring judgmentally down at the cooked fully-feathered bird…

Every time he caught his breath, Hannibal would pause in the middle of drying a fork/knife/sauce dish, tilt his head coyly, catch his eye and mouth 'sarcophagus' like the bastard he was and that would set Will off again.

"When people become parents, they undergo biochemical changes that affect the way they think."

So do killers, that tiny voice quipped unhelpfully.

"Dabbling in neuroscience, Doctor Lecter?"

"On occasion. For the sake of our patients, we have to stay on the frontiers of our fields. For me, it's in the growing field of neuropsychiatry — *ah* is that…?"

Familiar hands, dexterous and a little rough from time spent in the kitchen clasped his clammy right hand, drawing him out from his immersion in memories with their tremor of urgency. Will opened his eyes to confront the room but no one looked at him, all eyes fixed on the small screen mounted next to the recliner. Doctor Morales stepped back, the technician took over and made a small adjustment with the wand, searching for the right spot, the perfect angle, lying in wait for the break in movement. His eyes burned, never realizing until this very moment how desperate he was to find movement, the flutter of a beating heart, because he didn't believe in probability; he was the very proof of the statistical outlier.

There was a rapid frantic heartbeat.

Will closed his eyes, felt the relieved ache behind them.

Across the counter of the kitchen, Hannibal's eyes found his, moist with naked adoration. In the back of his mind, a trickle streamed into his ribs and circled before submitting to electrostatic attraction, the pool spun.

Will looked away and smiled, the beginnings of a small flutter in his stomach as he took a step closer, trying to not just get used to touch but to touching back. Still a little hesitant despite everything, Will cupped the alpha's face between his hands and pressed their mouths

together; this wasn’t what he imagined, not at all. It had been a cold calculation, but that didn’t matter anymore. He let himself be pressed back against the counter, tasted the raspberries and cream, violets and sunshine lingering on both their tongues.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you M - for lending your common sense to my imagination lol
I’ve paraphrased quite a few books in here, I’m not annotating cos this is a fic
If you figure out what I drew an idea from, please comment :) and let me know

I was supposed to publish 22 August - but I hated what I wrote so I tore it up and rewrote it (I had some issues health wise, affected thinking and perceiving) The previous version of the first scene wasn’t good, too much telling not enough painting

EDIT — 6 Oct 2024
I am sadly going through another health issue, and can’t handle being online. I will try to keep writing but I might not update for a long time. Right now I can’t make my writing coherent. Even knowing the plot it’s hard to put it into scenes, I wrote lots of scenes but none of it made me happy enough to put into this chapter, not even the parts that were meant to be in this chapter

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!